

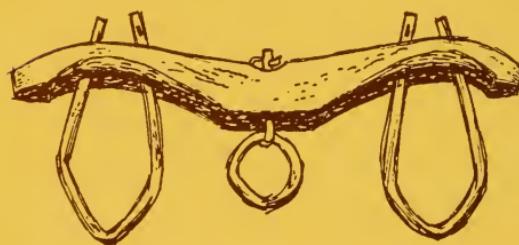
The Father

KATHARINE
HOLLAND
BROWN

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THE FATHER

The Father

by

Katharine Holland Brown



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KATHARINE HOLLAND BROWN was born in Alton, Illinois. She was graduated from the University of Michigan, where she was an honor student and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Following her graduation Miss Brown taught in the Quincy High School for two years and then engaged in newspaper and magazine writing.

Since then she has contributed many short stories and serial stories to the magazines and is the author of several novels: *Diana, A Romance of the Icarian Community*; *Dawn*; *Philippa at Halcyon*; *The Messenger*; *White Roses*; *Uncertain Irene*; *Hallowell Partnership*; *Wages of Honor*; *The Touchstone*; and a collection of Short Stories from the Bible.

In 1924 Miss Brown received an honorary M.A. degree from the University of Michigan.

Her permanent home is in Quincy, Illinois, although she lives at Orlando, Florida, a great part of the time.

THE FATHER

CHAPTER ONE

IT was Sunday morning. No doubt about that. It looked like Sunday, all tranquil autumn sunshine, and soft breezes, and mellow golden air. It sounded like Sunday, its sweet hours measured by the music of far bells. And as little Thomas observed, and wrinkled his fat nose wistfully, it smelled like Sunday. To be sure, it would seem that Thomas had shipped enough fuel at breakfast for the whole day's cruise. Baked beans, hot and savory from Saturday night in the brick oven, brown bread, so tender that you must eat it with a spoon, after plastering it with Grand-aunt Celestia's sacrosanct quince jam, brought down with ceremony from the sealed mysterious cupboard of her cottage up Stafford Hill; and finally a solid ballast of dough-nuts. But in the year of our Lord 1850, the storage capacity of a five-year-old boy was a thing of wonder, even as to-day.

Adoniram, his eldest brother, gave him a rebuking glance, then bent his skinny shoulders over his Old Testament. Past the freckles that enveloped him, even as a small god in a cloud, you caught glimpses of a bony sedate little face, brown eyes, a sober mouth. Adoniram was growing up. He did not find it a cheering process. When at the age of nine you are required to be the mark and pattern for two obstreperous younger brothers life becomes a heavy task. Little Thomas wasn't so awful, he reflected; but when it came to being responsible for Seth, Seth who was born, so Aunty declared, with both feet in the milk-pail . . . !

He sighed, chewed his tongue reflectively, and addressed himself to his text.

—“And the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, Hittites and Amorites, and Perizzites and Hivites and Jebusites——”

He took a long breath, pushed on.

—“And the children of Israel did evil—and served Baalim and the groves——”

“Therefore the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Chushan-Rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Chushan-Rishathaim eight years——”

A spark of interest kindled in Adoniram’s eyes.

“Father! Say, Father, did you know the children of Israel got sold once, to a mean old king?”

Father looked up from his new *Atlantic World*.

“What are you reading, Adoniram?”

“Judges, third chapter. Yes, sir, and I’ll bet old Chushan made slaves out of them, too. Just like the slaves we got, right here in America.”

Now, one moment before, Father had sat there, so slim and silent and aloof, from young silvered crest to gleaming morocco boots the very portrait of a sedate New England gentleman. But now he sprang to his feet. His lordly head flung high, his eyes began to flame. His tall black stock had been tied so firmly, it seemed only a convulsion of nature could budge it. But at the mere word “slaves” it reared erect, jumped under his left ear. A barometer, that stock.

“True, my son. In its day, every nation has staggered under the monstrous burden of slavery. Even our own free world still drags her chains. If I and my generation cannot throw off this crushing weight, you and yours will have to carry that load.”

Deep water for Adoniram. He sighed reflectively, read on.

“And Sisera gathered together his chariots, even nine

hundred chariots of iron. . . . So Barak went down from Mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him. . . . And all the host of Sisera fell upon the edge of the sword; and there was not a man left——”

“Gosh! Must have been a bully fight.”

“*Adoniram!*” With hardly a rustle, Aunt Celestia had entered the room. She stood before the shocked Adoniram in flounced black bombazine and gigantic hearse-plumed bonnet, and all her Sabbath wrath. “What language! What an example to your younger brothers!”

Adoniram humped. He appeared to shrink into himself like a harassed little snail. Father opened his mouth, then shut it again. Train up the child in the way he should go. At the same time—— He put a reassuring hand on Adoniram’s humbled shoulder.

“Donny, son, when we come home this afternoon, we’ll go down to Kimball’s orchard. Remember that flat place, by the brook, where we roast our potatoes, for picnics? We’ll call that the Plain of Kedesh, and the big hummock can be where the chariots of Sisera stood, and we’ll take along all the clothes-pins for soldiers——”

“Goody, goody!” Seth hurtled in, like all the battering-rams of the Amalekites. He tripped over Aunty’s ottoman and he crashed into the center-table. The beaded air-castle jingled, the waxen pomegranates leaped upon their crystal throne.

“ ’Scuse me, Aunty. I forgot it was Sunday.”

“Forgot it was Sunday. I don’t wonder. Of all the ungodly conversations! Battles, and roasting potatoes, and clothes-pins——”

Father wheeled on his sons with terrifying ferocity.

“Put down your Testaments! Off with your jackets! Scoot, now! Run up and down the garden till you’ve blown off some steam. You’re boiling over. Out of here. Travel!”

There was a smothered whoop. Out the three shot, like arrows from the Israelitish bow. Father remained, the scapegoat. As usual.

“John Stafford, what has come into you! Pompering your children like this! Doesn’t the Scripture warn you, ‘Evil is bound up in the heart of the child——’”

“‘Children are an heritage from the Lord. Blessed is the man who hath his quiver full.’” Father fixed his clear dark gaze on the Praying Samuel on the mantelpiece. Not even the Praying Samuel wore an aspect more smug.

Aunty sniffed.

“‘The rod and the reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.’”

“Solomon was a wise man, Aunty.” A glad light awoke in Father’s eye. Hooray! Here was the chance of a life-time! “But I cannot feel that he was a success in rearing children.”

“Humph. No more was David.”

Father choked. He might have known that his great-aunt would have him there. For thirty years he had striven to get the better of his grim ancient kinswoman, just once. For thirty years she had pricked that upblown ambition, as deftly as she pricked the crusts of her famous apple-pies. Royal adversary, she never gloated over her triumph. Instead, with somewhat ponderous tact, she invariably changed the subject.

Now she turned to the tall eagle mirror, and gazed disapprovingly at her dour First Day grandeur, the mournful cameo at her withered throat.

“I mistrust I ought to give Mercy Rose my tombstone.”

“Why? Mercy is barely sixteen. Too young for such costly ornaments.”

“And I’m too old for ‘em. Vanities, they are, for a woman seventy-four, going on seventy-five. Though I al-

ways did enjoy it. That weeping willow sets off the grave so tasty." With shamed fondness, she adjusted the vast and doleful gaud, then turned as a light step clicked on the stairs.

"Well, Mercy Rose! High time you finished primping."

"Daughter, you look very nice and tidy." Father put out his hand to her. He did not offer to caress her. Parents did not lavish caresses on young daughters in the year of our Lord, 1850. But as he looked on her, his face changed oddly. A curious light came upon it. Perhaps that light was the reflection of the young shining fairness before him. Perhaps it was the glow that comes to the face of any man when he looks on the woman who gives meaning and value to his life; even when that woman is his own motherless child.

Now when you looked at Mercy Rose all ready for church in her flounced and snowy dimity, the string of frosty seed-pearls on her round throat, her face shadowed by her wreathed and tilting bonnet, little mitted hands so primly folded, you said to yourself, "What a meek little silver-gilt saint!" But just then you caught a glimpse of her chin. Softly molded, velvet-white, but a chin. And as she took off her bonnet, the sun struck down on those thick silvery-gold braids, and woke in them a gleam darker than raw gold, a smoldering flame. And rather hastily you revised your first impression.

She stood a moment irresolute. For all her Puritan rearing Mercy was regrettably lax at times. She tripped across to her father, pounced on his hand and gave it a swift defiant squeeze. Then, squirming slightly as Aunt Celestia's eye bored a hole into her shoulder, she planted a small panicky kiss on his ear.

Aunty scorned to comment on this un-Sabbath-like behavior. Instead she turned indignantly away.

"Aunty doesn't like that." Father spoke under his breath.

"No. But I do." Mercy flashed a mutinous hazel eye at him. Aloud, she added: "I must tie your stock over, Father. It's all skewy. Now we ought to start. Wherever are the little boys? I'll wager they're all hot and mussy by now. Seth! 'Doniram! Little Thomas!'"

The three appeared as by magic, agog with conscious virtue. Not a grimy face was to be seen. Adoniram wore as always the burdened aspect of the head of a large and unruly family. Like his brothers he was apple-cheeked and hazel-eyed, with even clear features, well sprinkled with cinnamon freckles, and the sadly misleading expression of a cherub. Like his brothers, too, his thick fair hair was brushed high into a smooth roach, his small body was clad in a swallow-tailed, brass-buttoned jacket of deep and lurid blue, his short legs floundered in long tight flounced trousers of bright yellow nankeen. All three of them, as like as three peas, were the stern charge of Aunt Celestia, the pride of their father, and the anxious treasure of their elder sister's heart.

In other ways, however, the three were as absolute a set of individualists as so many snow-crystals. For all his care-worn guise Adoniram had a flair for mischief that approached genius. Lucky little sinner, he had long since discovered that Nemesis would sigh and turn aside whenever he put on what Mercy called his lonesome look. For through his days Adoniram moved as lonely, declared Father, as a poor freckled wild goose who has lost his mate. That wistful gaze had been known to subdue even Aunt Celestia. He carried it before his most riotous misdeeds, a mystic shield. Little Thomas, too, possessed an unfailing weapon in his croupy cough. In earliest youth the croup had all but cost him his life. Nowadays the mere suggestion of a croupy gasp would rouse his father to instant action, strike terror

to Mercy's heart. One need not add that even a faint and unconvincing bark was a very present help in trouble. Uncannily shrewd, Thomas had not worn out his alibi. It was good for years to come.

Seth, alas, could claim no such spiritual defender. He stood unshielded before the tempests of this world. "Everything I do is laid to me," he once lamented. And Seth got into trouble as the sparks fly upward. It was Seth who ate too much gingerbread, Seth who tumbled into the well, Seth who, while kneeling at family worship in the reverently darkened parlor, had attempted to unite the shoestrings of Adoniram to those of little Thomas. At least, such had been his intent. But in that Egyptian blackness he had blundered, as usual. And nobody was more astonished than Seth when, as the echoes of the crash died away, it was discovered that he had mistaken the shoestrings of their visiting parson for those of Adoniram.

In the bare high-shouldered meeting-house they sat in a decorous row. First Aunty entered, with some difficulty, for her voluminous crinoline must be steered with skill to make the strait and narrow channel of the pew door. Then the three boys, then Mercy, then Father. Father always closed the door on his flock with the air of a patriarch, but a jaunty and complacent young patriarch at that. Faults in plenty John Stafford possessed, but according to Aunty his worst failing was his sinful pride in his children. At her grim predictions, Mercy shivered with apprehension. If fire should actually sweep down from Heaven, to consume Father and his arrogant pride—Oh, well! That flame of retribution was welcome to come right along and consume her, too. So there!

As they settled into their places a little breeze passed over the congregation. It was a curious little breeze, not

quite welcoming, not quite friendly. And the glances that went with it were almost inimical. Mercy stiffened. Her steady eyes blazed.

"It's all on account of Father's editorial in last month's *Intelligence*," she thought, angrily.

That editorial had roused thousands to fuming resentment. Bitterly Mr. Stafford had accused his state of hypocrisy. "Shame upon you, men of Massachusetts! You who boast that your State is the cradle of freedom! In your own greed lies the very tap root of slavery. Hold fast to your mills, those looms of torment, whose cloth is woven of blood and tears. Build your vast ships, make staunch their masts, your ships that carry so infamous a cargo!"

No wonder that his timorous prosperous townsfolk had flinched and glowered as he passed by.

"Though that editorial wasn't any worse than the way he upset everybody last Town Meeting Day."

True. On Town Meeting Day Father had jarred Green River to its foundation stones. Following on the regular business meeting a group of august elders had debated among themselves whether the right hand of fellowship should be held forth to a family of newcomers whose son had served a sentence in Charlestown Prison for manslaughter. A relentless majority had held that the sins of the unfortunate should be visited upon his kindred, even to the third generation. "For assuredly we dare not open the doors of our sanctuary to these unhappy townsmen, whose hope of a future blessedness is thus destroyed, forever."

Even as their chairman spoke, up came Editor Stafford. Respectfully he bowed to his grim elders, and stepped forward. But, most injudiciously, the chairman motioned him back.

"Where do you stand, Brother Stafford? Do you not agree with us, that our decision is but just?"

Pompously, he explained. Father listened. His tall stock twitched somewhat, but his courteous attention did not waver. But over his face came an ominous sweetness; when he spoke at last, his voice was smooth as cream.

"I see your viewpoint, gentlemen. I would say that a mile down the post road, you will find a sizable heap of stones. It will be edifying to see which among you decides that he is the one to cast the first stone."

That was all. It was quite enough. Too jolted for words, the committee sat gaping. No doubt but that Father and his household would have been expelled from the congregation but for one potent reason: the meeting-house needed a new roof, and Editor Stafford, like his forbears, was a generous giver.

"They knew Father would pay half of the roof, maybe more. But they looked down their noses at him for months. Then the Pacific Railroad came along—my goodness!"

The Pacific Railroad had been a nine days' scandal. Rash prophet, Editor Stafford had set forth, beneath his own unabashed signature, his astounding prediction. He had declared that he and his sons would live to ride on a railroad that would stretch directly across the Continent and tie Boston Harbor to that ungodly hamlet, San Francisco! Foolishness, hey? Blasphemy. Rank blasphemy. Had not the Almighty set an eternal barrier between the East and the West, a barrier built up of wall on wall of mountain range, of league on league of desert? Yet here stood John Stephen Stafford, poor presumptuous worm of the dust, and launched his puny challenge at that deathless Law!

Yet their supreme grievance was his stand on Abolition. For a Stafford, a Green River Stafford, a prince of the blood, whose ancestors had not only built Green River, but had endowed it with its loftiest traditions, to join that rag-tag and bob-tail crew! And drat the man, he was so in-

fernally serene about it! To see him stride down Stafford Hill, his silver head flung high, his gray eyes snapping, his tall stock fairly spoiling for a fight, you'd think that those Black Republican notions of his were something to be proud of. Agitator. That was the word for him. Agitator. A traitor to his exalted forbears. A hissing and a reproach.

Mercy turned and looked at him, serious, adoring. It was as if she looked into a mirror of prophecy. Feature for feature, glance for glance, they two were cast in the same mold. Broad forehead, clear hazel eyes set wide apart, cool lips, unflinching chin. Even her silver-gilt hair, thick and fine in its netted braids, held the glint of his heavy silver crest. But on her face, so lovely, so untouched, shone all youth's heady eagerness, its flying mystery; while, graven deep on his own, you read the hard endurance, the dogged scornful patience, of a man who has carried too heavy burdens, who has labored always on tasks not rightfully his own. The face of a dreamer, gentle yet arrogant, sardonic, patient and aloof.

Her father turned, glanced at her. Through him there swept like a wave the tender awe, the passion of love and gratitude, that swept him always when he looked on this, his dearest child. He held his sturdy sons in proud affection. But Mercy was different. She was not just the child of his body. She was the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Of all his hopes, she was fulfillment. To all his deep perplexities she gave triumphant answer. His eyes upon her were tenderness. Of what could she be thinking, to bring that grave thought to her eyes, that stainless wonder?

Absently Mercy shifted Thomas higher against her shoulder, and freed one parboiled arm for a brief respite. Thomas had succumbed early, and as was his custom, he had gone to sleep on the first person that came handy. Of

wintry Sabbaths, his hot chunky body was a comfort. But in this summer warmth, he steamed up like a dear little stove. She then resumed her reflections, which dealt with the starched splendors of her new pantalettes. With chastened satisfaction, she reflected that not another girl in the congregation could boast such pantalettes. She twisted a slim leg, to get a better view. Aunty had embroidered them for her, of course. Aunty was forever rebuking her for vanity and quoting Jeremiah about the daughters of Zion with their wimples and their crisping-pins; but it was Aunty who had sewn the fairy tucks in her four clattering wagon-sheets of petticoats, and bought her a whole carnal yard of white hair-ribbon, and given her the sumptuous Neapolitan coal-scuttle with its wreathed roses inside which framed her face like a mist.

She turned to her father again and slid her hand against his wrist. On his face lay a strange shadow. A dark new anxiety. A clouding dread.

An anxious ache woke in Mercy's heart. For weeks, her father had seemed rasped and worried. She could not imagine why.

"He ought to tell me things," she thought resentfully. "He never does tell me anything that he's afraid will worry me. Everything is all right with the house and the children, I know that. And when people pick at him, he doesn't care one bit. He just laughs at them inside. Outside, sometimes, too. I wish I knew what bothers him. If only——"

Her father did not look her way. His eyes were dark with heavy thought. One lean fine hand clenched on his knee.

"Firstly, my brethren, we will consider——"

Mercy leaned to Adoniram, gave him a consoling pat, slicked down Seth's cowlick, then braced herself for the long, strong pull of the sermon. Invariably she listened,

with a face of angelic absorption, until she had grasped the text and enough of the interpretation thereof to fortify her against Aunty's vigilant Sunday-dinner catechism. This task discharged, she permitted her mind to relax to things mundane. Under demurest lashes she pondered upon her fellow-worshipers.

Across from her sat Lucinda Perkins, her most intimate friend. But Mercy did not dare look her way, for Lucinda, plump and apple-cheeked and bouncing, was a giggler from the cradle. One glance, one nod, would set her off. Safer to keep your eyes on the parson.

In front of Lucinda, in the chill red-rep dignity of the Amberley pew, drooped the wan and lovely Miss Evelina Amberley, in all her frills and laces and follow-me-lads, as scalloped and frilled and fluted as her name. Miss Evelina was a puzzle. She was more than twenty years old, an old maid, no gainsaying that, but such an old maid! With her transparent fairness, her deep blue eyes, the pale soft ringlets that framed her lily face, she could have sat for the Spirit of Poesy. The drooping billowing flowing Poesy of 1850. But deep in those violet eyes, flickering in that slow grace of movement, you caught something that was not in the picture: a glint of bleak sullen question; a tragic gleam.

Mercy now devoted some moments of reflection to Miss Evelina. She sat there, as frail and translucent as the spun-glass lilies in Aunty's teakwood cabinet, as crisp and brittle as the fine paper ladies that Mercy used to cut from *Godey's Lady's Book*. She was like nothing on earth but a paper lady, Mercy thought, she'd crumple and break if you so much as breathed on her.

Yet this very morning, as the family had come up the church-yard path, Miss Evelina had stepped down from her grand barouche. Clouded in laces, misty, pale, silent,

she had stood a moment, her eyes fixed on the three little boys.

Then with a soft rush, she had pounced on little Thomas, snatched him into her slight arms, and hugged him till his fat astonished ribs creaked. Swiftly as she had caught him up, she put him down, and turned so softly, so silently, away.

“But she didn’t say one word to the rest of us!” Mercy stared after her. A curious memory awoke. “That other time, I must have been only ten years old. Ten, going on eleven, maybe——”

Ten, going on eleven, and she and Lucinda were playing down the orchard, making hollyhock dolls. Up the broad brick walk to the house, came Miss Evelina. She had driven up to pay her stately annual call;—but—incredible! At sight of the two little girls, she had hesitated; then she had turned, floating across the sun-warmed grass to them.

“I used to make flower dolls,” she said, shy as another child, for all her grown-up young-lady splendor. “May I play, too?”

Down she sank beside them. The next minute, she was fashioning the most ornate ladies ever beheld. Daisy petals made point-lace frills around slim broom-straw necks, petunias tilted to form bewitching sun-shades. She was just looping up a fern-leaf train when Uncle Joel came galloping up the lawn on his great black Diomed. Uncle Joel, Mercy’s wonderful young uncle, galloping back, as always, from one of his mysterious romantic journeys. Although he had been gone for a month, he had not stopped at the house, to face Aunty’s cold rebuking eyes, to grant one minute to father’s anxious questions. Not Uncle Joel.

“Oh! Uncle Joel!” Mercy sprang up and ran to him. But he did not stoop to kiss her, and toss her up for a canter on Diomed. He did not even speak to her. Instead, he stood

perfectly still, and looked and looked at Miss Evelina, as if he saw her for the first time.

Miss Evelina looked back at him. Her blue eyes did not flinch. Her beautiful mouth did not quiver.

Then, before you could blink, he had laughed out loud and high, and he had snatched up Miss Evelina, and tossed her to his saddle, and leaped up behind her, like a great gay prince in a story-book. Down Stafford Road the black horse galloped away.

Horrified and delighted, Mercy and Lucinda stared after them. It was more than an hour before they came galloping back.

But now Uncle Joel was not laughing at all. He had sprung down and lifted Miss Evelina to her feet, as carefully as if he lifted down the spun-glass lily itself. Then he had stood and looked at her again. Suddenly he had caught Miss Evelina up into his arms, and held her to him a long minute, his dark head dropped against her lacy shoulder, his face hidden in her throat.

Only a minute, though. For it seemed as if Miss Evelina, frail little paper-lady, was stronger than he; for she put up her tiny soft hands, and pushed him back. And he had yielded, and let her go. He drew back, staring down into her stern ashen-white face. And in the late sunlight, his hard handsome young face was even whiter than her own.

Beside Miss Evelina in their tall fortress-pew sat her father, stately old Judge Amberley. Between Father and Judge Amberley lay a life-long friendship. Sixty years ago, a starved terrified waif of nine, ragged little Lucius Amberley had been apprenticed to Father's grandfather, Richard Huntingdon. Richard Huntingdon, wealthy, generous, kind, had reared the boy in his own household, educated him, set his feet on the road of success. Then the pendulum had

swung, and while the Huntingdon estates had diminished, young Lucius had doubled, trebled, quadrupled, his slender gains. His ships were symbols of fortune. His great house on Beacon Hill was a palace, even in the midst of palaces. But every year he came back to Green River, more to feast his eyes on the sight of Father, beloved descendant of his own second father, than for any other reason. To-day Mercy saw him turn his splendid old gray head, saw his deep eyes light with proud confident affection.

"He looks at Father just as Father looks at Adoniram," she thought. "When Adoniram's got his ears pinned back, that is. Not always."

Two seats away sat Deacon Heber Lyman, just back from a journey to the wilds of Illinois, where he had been the guest of his twin brother, Timothy D. At thought of the absent Timothy, Mercy's lips quirked. Whenever those twins sat side by side in meeting, it took a superhuman effort to tell them apart. They differed only as one stiff frozen salt codfish from another. To be sure, Timothy was a cod smooth-shaven, while the Deacon was a codfish with side-whiskers. But both gave you the same slippery, squeamly feeling, both wore square green spectacles; and behind those spectacles, you met the same cold salt filmy glare.

"Sixthly, my brethren," droned Parson Avery. Mercy groaned. Sunday before last, he'd gone on to Seventeenthly. No telling. Her foot was asleep. Her very ears felt stuffed and taut.

Away she fled on the trail of magic. Alone she fled. But not for long. At the first turn of the woodland path, he would come galloping to meet her, lordly on his snow-white charger, her prince, her lover. His lance at rest, his banner flying in the wind, that wind that never blew on land or sea. . . .

From across the aisle she could feel the eyes of Lemuel

G. Crowther glued upon her face. Lemuel, arrayed like a youthful Solomon, sat in the bosom of his devoted family. If you didn't mind pretending, you could pretend that Lemuel was your knight, though it was uphill work. There was no doubting Lemuel's devotion. He had brought her maple sugar in rough-edged luscious chunks, he had spied out the first snow-apples for her; he had even sent her a valentine, all hearts and darts, with an original poem of a hauntingly familiar flavor.

Above Lemuel's pale blue eyes, his pale pink hair reared in a lofty roach. It glittered with bears' grease, it was scented with bergamot till all the winds of heaven were faint with him. Below that august front one observed a ruffled white shirt and tight trousers strapped under cruel tight new boots. He would look lots more knightly, she thought with regret, if he wasn't chewing surreptitiously on a chunk of sassafras root. Between those spit-curls and that clamped, industrious jaw, he didn't quite qualify. When you thought it over, there wasn't a single boy in Green River who seemed one set apart for chivalry. Eliphilet Gurney, Amariah Prescott, Lemuel,—each had made sheep's eyes at her, but that was all.

It would be nice if a girl could go riding out and find her own true knight. But how unladylike! Still, the damsels of Faëry were forever getting rescued. And how could she ever need rescuing if she hadn't started out and got into distress, first?

A joyful gurgle fell upon her ear. Beside her Seth had sat this endless hour, his active mind aching with enforced idleness, his plump legs dangling in torture over the high knife-edged seat. Suddenly came respite. Through the tall bare window floated a bee.

Seth saw it first. In an ecstasy of gratitude, he leaned forward, farther and farther, to watch that whimsy flight. In

evil joy, he prayed that it might alight on Preacher's book. Then his breath caught in rapture. For he saw it was headed straight for Mrs. Deacon Kimball's bonnet. It was a very lummox of a bee, for didn't it alight, confidently, on the ghastly scintillating wheat stalks, embalmed in alum, that twined a spectral garland around her red good-humored face. Then, sadly disillusioned, it buzzed aloft, wavered, with confidence renewed, it settled down on the smashed blue rose, just above one matronly ear.

Taut with delight, Seth leaned out, farther, farther; . . . with a splutter of fright he sprawled off the seat and lit with a thump on the bare board floor.

Paralyzed with horror, Aunty sat, speechless. But Father stooped, seized him by his infant swallow-tails, and swung him back on the seat with an even louder thump. Then he glanced at Mercy. Mercy glowed back. Her heart began to dance. Father couldn't be much worried and laugh inside like that.

"Finally, my brethren," Parson Avery was tuning up to his climax, "Finally, my brethren, let us stand firm in the faith, let us not be led aside by false prophets in sheep's clothing, while within they are ravening wolves. It is borne in upon me, to my sorrow, that in this congregation of the righteous, there stand men who would tempt us aside from ways of holiness. These have been drawn away by the smooth word of the fanatics, the agitators, who would set at naught the Lord's decrees. What saith Holy Writ? 'Let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water forever.' Yet these misguided men would set free the bondsman from his ordained place. They would strike down, they would destroy, they would drench this nation in blood. Brethren, let us be warned. Let us beware!"

Again that chill breeze went through the congregation.

A chill that struck the heart. Again those unfriendly eyes turned to the Stafford pew. But not one Stafford flinched. The boys were too little to understand. Father's face was cut from granite. Aunt Celestia did not bat an eyelash. But, hid in her flounces, Mercy's hands clinched. Fury choked in her throat. How dared Parson Avery to strike at Father! Strike at him right in meeting! A minister, indeed! Hateful, meddling old man! For two cents, she'd tell him what she thought of him. Tell him right to his horrid old face.

She looked at Father. Father looked back at her. A dancing devil awoke in his eye.

Fearfully she looked at his stock. It stood straight as a ramrod, inimitably serene. Not one skew to it. Not one single agitated quirk.

CHAPTER TWO

MERCY sat in her little white bedroom. On her knee she held two books. One was a plump pale blue volume entitled *Henry Esmond*, by an English gentleman named Thackeray. Lucinda Perkins, her very dearest friend, had slipped it into her reticule last prayer-meeting night when Aunty wasn't looking. The other volume was her diary, a gift from Aunty, upon her graduation from the Green River Academy last May. It was a ponderous affair, and, like all Aunty's gifts, austere and costly. It was bound in heavy black leather, and it was stamped in gold:

MERCY ROSE STAFFORD

MAY THE FIRST

1850

Inside was written in Aunty's cramped and spidery hand:

*Refrain, my Pen, from words, or Mean, or Vile.
Even as my Tongue refrains from Speaking Guile.*

Further, upon each day's pages, Aunty's own foresighted pen had bracketed off a space marked "Spiritual Meditations." Three hundred and sixty-five times, had she set aside this small, inexorable space. "Here I expect you to write down your deepest convictions as well as your most exalted thoughts," she had announced, when she laid the diary into Mercy's hands.

How under the firmament could anybody scare up deep convictions every single day of the year? thought Mercy, dismayed.

Aunty had added, "Remember, no human eye will ever

read these lines. What stands written here is between you and your own soul." Therefore, when Mercy's spirit declined to soar to far heights, the extra lines came in handy for a secular overflow.

Now she looked on *Henry Esmond* with longing eyes. Sad, but stern, she rose, and tucked him safely behind Milton on the top shelf. But again temptation assailed her.

"No, I will not read it to-day, for it does not befit the Sabbath.—Only one peek. To see whether they really do get married—"

The long gold afternoon waned. Mercy sat scrouged into her dormer window. Her cheeks were burning, her eyes glowed dark. She was no longer Mercy Rose Stafford of Green River, Massachusetts, in embroidered pantalettes and a brand-new blue delaine. She was Beatrix Esmond, fair, regal, haughty as any queen. Her glorious head was flung high, her robe of velvet trailed upon the marble stair. Before her knelt Colonel Esmond. His strong hand shook on his scabbard: his proud head bent so close she could touch the dark shining locks that brushed her knee. . . .

"Mercy Rose! Haven't you finished your chapter for next Sunday?"

Henry Esmond shot under Thomas's trundle bed.

"Please, Aunty, I would like to write in my diary."

"Oh." A gratified pause. "Well. Come down as soon's you're through."

Mercy seized her tall quill pen, planted herself at her desk, set resolutely to work.

"First Day, September third, 1850.

"This is a beautiful Sabbath day. We had a verry edifying Sermon, on the text, They have sown wheat, they shall reap thorns. Jeremiah XIII.

"I am so hopping mad at Parson Avery for saucing Father right out in meeting that I cannot think of anything else, but I will put him aside and discuss him when I get to my spiritual meditations. I am properly getting red-hot for nothing at all, for Father did not seem to mind. He only laughed at me. Though Aunty said that it was enough to Blast him where he stood. Aunty said also that whenever any of her family stood in need of correction, she was capable of giving it herself, and that with all due reverence to Parson Avery, he was a born Nosey if she ever saw one. Sometimes I feel that Aunty is the most agreeable relation I have got.

"Father wore his new Morocco boots to church. They cost twenty-two dollars. Thomas said he thought Father's legs were beautiful and Aunty said that was all vanity, and that the Lord hath no pleasure in the legs of a man.

"As soon as service was over, Father hunted up Miss Euphemia Parish, and Old Captain Jones and invited them to dinner, and brought them in the carryall. So poor Miss Euphemia had something beside bread and tea for once in her life. I think it is dreadful to be seventy-six and a maiden lady and have made your living for sixty-eight years, doing plain needlework, and no wonder she enjoys chicken potpie and black fruit-cake. And the Captain is eighty-six, and he fought through the Revolution and then came home and got married twice and after a while there came the War of 1812 and he fought aboard Perry's Flagship, and then came home and got married again and then he wanted to go to the Mexican War, because, he told Father, it seemed to come so natural. But by that time he was eighty and they couldn't take him along and now his son-in-law lets him live there and allows him fifty cents a month for clothes and tobacco money. A very Christian act.

"He comes to dinner almost every Sunday, and he gets so

excited and happy, and tells us all about the battles he has been in, and stomps up and down the dining-room floor and acts it all out, and Aunty thinks it is scandalous for Father to let him carry on so on the Sabbath, and Father says, 'If I was eighty-six I would want the privilege of showing off, too.' But Aunty says It is a grievous example for the little boys. Besides, she says she feels that if Father is bound to profane the Sabbath day by bringing folks home to dinner, he might invite somebody elegant for once, like Judge Amberley, or Major Preston from Ipswich, and Father says, 'Perhaps you are right, Mrs. Dives,' and he laughed and patted her shoulder, but she didn't see what he meant by Mrs. Dives, and no more do I.

"It is borne in upon me that I ought to keep my mind on serious things, for I heard Aunty tell Father she intended to give me her tombstone and I realize she feels I am growing up and should be making up my mind unless I wish to be considered an old maid like Miss Euphemia. Of course if I was picking out any special boy for my own true knight, I should like to please the folks as well as myself, and I guess that won't be so easy.

"To begin with, there is Jonas Tuckerman. He is tall and sightly-looking, but the little boys plumb despise him, because he came along last March in his cutter to take me sleighing and I had gone skating with Lemuel, so Jonas was annoyed and said to the little boys, Hitch on your sleds and I will take you all for a ride, so they hitched and didn't he haul them out as far as Newell's Mill, and then cut the sled ropes, and off he kited, and they had to walk all the way home, and Thomas had croup for a week. And Aunty scalded Seth twice with yarb tea.

"I felt I could never forgive Jonas that cruel trick, but Jonas brings me Boston candy in a box with paper lace on

it every single week and he also sent me the most expensive valentine I ever saw. It had 35c marked inside. And Jonas's father has just bought a fine new farm, down Fitchburg way, so a person has to be forbearing in all things.

"Then there is Eliphilet Carver. His mother is always asking me there to supper, and telling me what a good little boy he used to be and always went to bed when told, and never talked back in all his born days. But Aunty says she never could really abide 'Liph because he resembled the Prodigal Son in the Bible picture.

"Of course there is always Lemuel G. Crowther. He has shown me much real devotion. I believe he regards me as his life's ideal. Anyhow, in the poem he wrote me last Christmas, he same as said so. But Father says, if Eliph looks like the Prodigal Son, then Lemuel looks like the Fatted Calf. I consider Lemuel good-looking, but I do wish he would not wear those spit-curls. Nor that blue nuby. But his mother says his chest is tender, so I suppose it is necessary. Aunty says she has no patience with any of them, they are so half baked, and if 'Liph and Jonas do not cease wearing their trousers so tight their legs will mortify. I respect Lemuel and I admire him, but I can't help wishing he had some of Jonas's style, and it would be grand to have him bring me Boston candy, instead of always blackjack and Gibraltars stuck together in a paper bag. . . ."

A cooler wind drifted through the reddening maples, and sent whispering flights of scarlet and gold and amber scurrying up and down the path. Even while their dinner guests lingered, the little boys had tugged imploringly at Father's coat. Decorous and silent, so as not to worry Aunty, Seth gathered up the clothespins. Then, Indian file, stepping lightly as so many Mohawk papoosees, they glided down to

Kimball's orchard. Mercy looked after them wistfully. But Father's Sundays were possessed in fee simple by the little boys.

"Mercy Rose Stafford, are you ever coming down?"

Mercy laid down her diary and fled down the stairs.

Faint echoes of conflict came from the orchard, for the little boys were now in full cry after the Amalekites, and the Jebusites were being hurled asunder. Fortunately, Aunty's deaf ear was turned toward the window.

Aunty wore her Sabbath afternoon face, sterner than her weekday aspect, yet inexplicably more gentle. She had taken off her Sunday hoops to save the wear and tear and this gave her a singularly deflated look. She sat in the slippery hair rocker with the pomegranates carved atop, exactly where her weary head would slide off with a racking jolt if it dared to lean back for one instant. But no earthly power would ever beguile Aunty into an easy chair.

Aunty did not sit alone in that wide tranquil room. There were other people there; people whose eyes followed you wherever you went. Dusk-painted shadows, these others, whose flowing trains and velvet breeches, plumes and jewels and tarnished sword-belts, made flares of wine and crimson and silver against the gray walls. There was Great-grandfather Davenport, with his plum-colored coat, his bluff red face, his proud Georgian wig, and the wall-eye which the conscientious artist had emphasized rather than glossed over. There were his three daughters, the Three Graces, as Beacon Hill of their day had declared them, slim dryad damsels in narrow pale Empire satins. Their delicate high breasts were girdled with pearls, their long pale arms were circled in rose-coral and in gilded traceries of filigree. And there was not one crinoline, not so much as one modest womanly petticoat, among all three! Across from them hung Great-grandmother Huntingdon, all peach brocade

and emeralds, a gorgeous sulky macaw chained on her wrist, while two tiny negro pages in vermillion livery waited to tend on her brocaded train. Father's people, brought back from the dark old Mount Vernon Street house to Green River, his mother's birthplace, when death and waning fortunes had driven the family from its high place. Not that that harsh truth meant anything in Mercy's life. All her days had been spent in this sunny homestead. To her, this peaceful old house with its flowery garden, its broad farms, its cradling orchards, spelled home. It would spell home forever.

Aunty looked up and gave her an approving nod.

“Your hair looks master neat in that chenille net, Mercy. Fine as your great-grandma's.”

Mercy eyed her ancestress with scant favor.

“I think great-grandmother looks stuck up. Maybe she couldn't help that, being as she was born in Virginia. But she needn't have peacocked around forever, balancing those plumes and fallals and trailing that train. Even if she did have two little darkies in short pants, to carry it for her.”

“She didn't spend all her days in peacocking, Miss, mind that. She managed her home plantation with three hundred slaves on it, she taught her girls to spin and weave and wash and cook, and she kept an eye on the fields and the gardens, besides. She was a born leader, and a fighter, too. When the Britishers came to burn the big house and loot the place, didn't she order up her field hands and arm them with the muskets she had bought and hid in the tobacco warehouse. She'd even drilled her men against that very chance. And she tucked up her petticoats, and led them out against the attack, herself. They tell it that she shot his horse from under the English captain who was leading the raid, and held her pistol to his aide's head, and forced them both to yield their arms, and then locked 'em in the south guest

chamber till your grandfather came rushing home, half mad with fear for her."

"Then what did she do to the Britishers? Keep them locked up on bread and water?"

"Not she. She brings out her keys and opens up her store-room, and sets them down to a dinner fit for King George himself. And the Britishers ate like starved hounds. They ate till she was clean scared for them. Yes, she was as fine as they come. Be thankful that you take after her."

"Well, maybe I do take after great-grandmother. But——" she frowned rebelliously, "but look at her chin!"

Chin, indeed. Steady and hard and square, lifted high above the Flemish laces, the glittering stones. Iron.

"Oh, very well, Miss. It happens to be your own chin, too."

Mercy felt of her own chin. Velvet. Under the velvet, the square little hard jaw. Iron.

"Never you mind, Mercy. Folks have got to have a mite of iron in them, if they hope to amount to anything. Besides, it's your father's chin, too. Every inch of it."

Mercy's eyes cleared. Anything to be like Father.

"Does everybody have to go back to somebody else?"

"Everybody goes right back to somebody else. Seth takes straight after my grand-uncle, Simeon. Simeon was a bog-gler and a blunderer, every day of his life. Adoniram is the breathing image of Gran'ther Davenport, freckles, and solemn pop-eyes, and all. Your father has skimmed the cream off the whole batch. If just he wasn't so sinful proud, so high-headed, so stubborn!"

Father was perfection's self. Only——

"I think Father is all the grander, just because he is so set. But—— Oh, Aunty, I do wish he wasn't so set on anti-slavery!"

"I know, Mercy. I never could hold with those abolition

notions of his. Land knows, I've tried to reason with him. Might's well try to reason with the wind. And other folks despise his Black Republican ideas, even worse than I do. Take Mr. Emerson. He's dead against slavery, but he stops short of being a fanatic. He don't believe in carrying any fight so far. Remember the last time he stayed with us? He and your father wrangled it out all night. I consider Mr. Emerson is sinfully unorthodox, but when it comes to anti-slavery, I'll own he shows more good hard gumption than John ever dreamed of."

Mercy remembered. She could see Mr. Emerson, his tall stooped figure, his lean keen face, his blue eyes, hard as blue stones, under clear questioning brows. She could hear his steady reiterated words:

"I know, I know, Stafford. But you and I have other prisoners to free, not negroes alone. It is our work to free imprisoned spirits, shackled thoughts, to free the minds of men, before we seek to break the chains of bondage——"

—"And much good it did him, to argue himself hoarse. Your father didn't yield him a hair's breadth. But it's not just John's high-flown ideas that worry me, Mercy. It's the way he makes a pack-horse of himself, year in, year out, for folks that ain't fit to black his boots for him. Not only for his own blood, but for everybody else. His kinsfolk is the worst, though. They've all hung on his coat-tails, forever more. From Great-grandfather Davenport, on down."

"I know that." Oh, if Father could only take life a little easier! If he could only go prancing through his days, like Uncle Joel!

"Listen, Aunty. Who does Uncle Joel take after?"

"What!" Aunty wheeled sharply. All the Sunday peace went out of her face. Her faded mouth grew hard, her eyes grew stony. "Don't talk to *me* about your Uncle Joel!"

“W-why——”

“H’m. Don’t I know him, root and branch? Always galloping off on the finest horses money can buy; always tearing away to the world’s end, to make his everlastin’ fortune; always careerin’ home with some new plan that’s bound to put the Staffords back at the top of creation, right where they belong, and spending your Pa’s money to do it with——”

Aunty stopped. A mortified scarlet poured over her face. Aunty was a bred-in-the-bone Puritan, with all that that implies. But unlike her critics of to-day, she hesitated to smirch the mind of a child.

“I donno what possessed me, Mercy. Your father thinks Joel is the pick of creation. He’s the young brother, the Benjamin of his house, to your father.”

“But—why—how——”

“Have you learned your chapter for next Sunday, Mercy? Recite it to me. Right now. You haven’t so much as *started* it? Well, I donno what children are coming to. In *my* day——”

Mercy sniffed. Trust Aunty to change the subject whenever she saw fit, and change it with a bang.

Up from Kimball’s orchard, hot and tired and gorgeously happy, came the three little boys. Lightly they trod. No need of worrying Aunty. They had smitten the Canaanites and despoiled the Egyptians and walloped the Amalekites and sent the Moabites scuttling for shelter. “Moab shall be my washpot, over Edom will I cast out my shoe,” chanted Adoniram, a ferocious young conqueror. Seth, a wounded archer, strutted before him, holding his bandaged arm outstretched. Little Thomas swaggered high in his war chariot. Wreathed dancing girls tossed their timbrels before him. Wailing captives dragged his dreadful car. Little boys can dream dreams, too.

"Oh, didn't we have a grand old fight! Mercy, you ought to of been there, too!"

Father pinched Mercy's ear, looked down at her, tenderly, quizzically. Over her shoulder the new moon threaded silver, silver as her folded braids against the gold of sunset. She was like the new moon herself, this girl of his, this branch of young willow, white as curds, slim as a reed in the wind.

"The grandest victory of our campaign, Mercy. Next time, you must come along." All the dark worry of the morning had faded from his eyes. He himself was just a hot tired happy little boy.

Suddenly Seth forgot his honorable wounds. He shot past them, with a joyful shout, "Who-ee! Goody, goody, goody! It's Uncle Joel, it's Uncle Joel!"

"Joel!"

Father dropped Mercy's hand. He stepped back. All that contentment, that impish fun, vanished like a breath. All that dark weary anxiety came flooding back upon his face, a drowning wave.

Then he jerked himself erect, went forward, hands outstretched. His high clear voice rang out——

"Joel, boy! Glad to see you. Here, Donny, take his horse for him. Welcome home!"

CHAPTER THREE

UNCLE Joel! No royal guest was ever welcomed more joyfully. Father grasped his hands and clapped him on the shoulder. The little boys hurled themselves upon him with hugs and yelps of eager delight. There was never anybody so wonderful as Uncle Joel. Just when you thought him far away in Paris or California or South America, he would come storming in, with the pockets of his greatcoat stuffed with gifts, and a score of adventures on his tongue. He was only ten years younger than Father, and Father was nearly forty, which was crowding Methuselah, but you could never look on Joel without a thrill. The thrill of his youth, the high-pitched insolent splendor which was as much a part of him as the laugh in his gay eyes, the ring in his loud gay voice. He was supposed to be a clerk in a Boston bank, learning the business, but you could never see Uncle Joel in a sagging linen coat and a faded eye-shade. Never. He was as one predestined, set apart, to prance through the world on a mettlesome steed, a lordly cavalier. Even as he dashed headlong from your sight, his bold, merry spirit called back to you, echoing down the years. No. The dingy desk, the drudging hours, were not for Uncle Joel.

Now he threw his arms around his elder brother. He tossed his costly hat on the ground, put both unabashed arms around Aunty, and planted a vigorous kiss upon her withered cheek. Aunty attempted a shocked but unconvincing sniff. He romped with the little boys, he bowed low before Mercy, even while he pulled her shining braids and pinched her chin. Only John Stafford looked on his brother, his

Benjamin, without eagerness, without delight, but with a great anxious love and fear.

The sunset faded. The little boys went reluctantly to bed. Father led Uncle Joel into his study, and the two men faced each other. The younger face, so reckless, so insolent, clouded swiftly.

"No, John, I'm not doing as well with my investments as I'd hoped. Yes, to be sure you let me have that three thousand last spring. I was certain I'd double it by now. But the fact is——"

"What were your investments, Joel?"

"Why, there were several of them. They promised huge returns. But by fiend's luck, they've all gone by the board. I've been forced to—to borrow money in order to keep my footing, till I can—realize——"

"Just what were the investments, Joel?"

All at once, Uncle Joel flared up like a rocket.

"Oh, if you're bound you'll push me to the wall! I took a long chance and that started the trouble. Trying to recoup, I lost every copper. But I was sure I couldn't lose a third time. I—my luck turned, I tell you. I'm flat broke. And what the bank will say——"

"You mean that you borrowed from the bank. How much?"

Joel glared up with stricken eyes. For all his insolent young splendor, he looked younger now than little Thomas. And his brother's heart melted within him.

"Never mind, Joel, tell me. In round numbers, what does it come to? Your losses at faro, and the lottery shares, and all of it."

"Oh, nine thousand, or thereabouts. Not a cent less."

For a minute, John Stafford was too stunned to speak.

"Joel, you can't have lost all that! Why, it's more than our whole estate. You know it has taken all I could earn, to

pay off father's debts. I'm still owing the Salem firms for their losses on the *Semiramis*—”

“The *Semiramis*! And she sank in '36! For God's sake, don't rake up all that ancient history. Keep your eyes on the hole I'm in. I tell you, I've got to have the money. —And here you yammer away about paying Father's debts! Father's in his grave. He's not the one who's facing ruin.”

“Joel, you know I'll do everything I can—”

“If you didn't throw away so much time and money on your demented notions about freeing slaves— You're one of the ablest editors in America. Yet here you waste your time, you make a laughing stock of yourself, in your absurd *Intelligence*. When you know I'm at the end of my rope!”

Father pulled himself together.

“Steady, Joel. We'll manage, somehow. You can depend on me. You know that. Every time.”

Joel's white face flushed with swift relief. He leaned back with a long shivering sigh.

“Yes, I know that. I was a beast, to say what I did. I might have known that you'd stand by. You always do.”

He leaned toward his elder brother. But John Stafford thrust him back with a stern question.

“Joel, what about that girl? Beautiful, gentle creature! She never asks for you. She has her pride. But when I see her, when I see the way she looks at me, it makes me sick at heart.”

“Oh, it does, does it? Then maybe you can guess what the thought of her does to me. Love her? I love the ground she walks on. But she's made of steel, I tell you. Steel. Of course, her father started it all. 'Go out into the world, and prove yourself a true Stafford, worthy of your high name,' he said to me. There he stood, in his fine clothes, with his gold-headed cane, and his jaw set like the everlasting hills,

and glowered at me. The beggar on horseback he is! But I don't mind him. He's easily handled, for back of all that bluster he's an honorable old fellow. He knows that he'd be nobody to-day if it hadn't been for us Staffords. And there's a streak of softness in him, every time. But Evelina! She's steel, I tell you, she's steel to the core."

"You mean——"

"I mean that she'd hold me back, even though her father had given way completely. 'My father has spoken for me,' she said, 'I do not pledge myself to a spoiled boy, Joel.' So little and slim and light, I could break her with my finger. Hard? Worse. Cruel. And yet——"

"Yet, if you love her so, how can you take such mad chances?"

"If you want to know, it was for her that I took this last chance. I knew well enough that I was running the devil's own risk. But I'm mad for her, I tell you——"

He stood up, trembling.

John Stafford put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Right, Joel. I'll see you through. I'll manage."

A leaden weariness darkened his eyes. But his voice held itself to gentleness. "Yes, I'll manage. I've got to."

CHAPTER FOUR

MERCY ROSE was dressing for Wednesday evening prayer-meeting. Now for the proper damsel of that day, prayer-meeting called for second-best from bonnet to slippers. First-best was for Sunday morning alone. Hence her pantalettes were not embroidered, merely tucked, and her hat was a sedate ribboned Leghorn. Instead of the thread of tiny pearls that had been her mother's and the Chantilly shawl from Grandmother's lace chest, she wore a flat gold locket and an amber Canton scarf with wreaths of wisteria, of fading lilac-blue. Her second-best slippers had wide ribbon ties which Aunt Celestia had cut out of her old black lute-string, instead of stiff new rat-tail strings. They were not dependable, those wide and elegant ribbons, for the silk was old, and even a mild tug would snap them. But they flapped elegantly on her slender feet.

The locket, though, was disappointing. In an absent-minded hour, her father had bought it for her in Boston, and the wicked jeweler had cheated him with a thinly plated object which soon betrayed its base foundation. Partly that was Thomas's fault. Through weary hours in meeting, Thomas had cut his first teeth on that locket. He still chewed it in moments of stress. More than once, Mercy had felt alarmed lest the verdigris might work him grave injury. But so far Thomas's insides had proved of sterner stuff.

She clasped the locket, and viewed herself in the dim old mirror with chastened approval. Really, she looked quite ladylike. You'd never dream what a hoodlum she had been that very afternoon. Hoodlum was Aunty's word, and it was

only too accurate. "But I don't care. Not a mite!" Dark scarlet burned in her cheeks. "Just let that little scamp say Black Abolitionist again, then watch me!"

It was Seth as usual who had started things. Seth, sent forth all scrubbed and garnished for his Latin lesson, had returned betimes, roaring at the top of his lungs, and wearing the aspect of one who has fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, and come out a bad second.

"Seth! If you haven't been fighting *again!*!" Mercy took her hands out of the cooky dough, and rushed to him. "Here, stand by the sink—— Goodness, it isn't just your nose that's bleeding, it's that front tooth—— Hold still!" She snatched out the hapless little milk-tooth with a stern finger. "Never mind, you had to lose it, anyhow. Oh, how can you be so quarrelsome——"

"I ain't quarrelsome! I didn't start nothin'! Josiah Baynes, the big bully, he comes snoopin' out of Preston's lane, and hollers after me: 'Seth's pa's a Black Republican, a Black Nabolitionist, a Black Republican!' And I says, 'Say that again and I'll bang your snoot for you——'"

"Seth!"

"Never mind, Aunty, that isn't really swearing. So he called Father a Black Abolitionist, did he? What did he say then?"

"He says it all over again. 'Black Republican—Black Republican——!' And I says, 'Do you want it?' And he hollers, 'Try and do it!' And I give him one good bust. But he comes back and gives me a smack on the jaw, that knocks me flat. Then he scoots off, and yells back, 'Tell your pa we're fixin' for to run him out—run him out—run him out——!'"

"H'm. He said folks would run Father out, did he?" Mercy took off her apron, washed the flour from her hands. Then she tied on her shade hat, snatched down

Aunty's black crape dolman, with the long sad weepers, drew on her long lace mitts.

"Mercy Rose Stafford! What are you up to?"

"I'm going to call on Josiah Baynes, and pass the compliments of the day. Want to come along, Seth?"

"Goody, goody!" Joyously comprehending, Seth followed at her heels. A minute later, Josiah, chanting of his prowess to an admiring audience, beheld the approach of Fate. Wild-eyed, he dropped his recitative midway, and scuttled up a near-by tree. Alas, it was a frail young maple, and before he could descend, his enemy was upon him.

"Get down from that tree."

"I won't."

"Get down quick, young man. Unless you want me to come up after you."

"You can't. You're just a girl——"

Mercy's hat went one way, Aunty's dolman the other. With a flying leap, she caught the lowest branch, and swung her weight on it. This was the last move that Josiah expected. With a horrified squeal, he bounced off the branch, precisely as if he had bounced off a springboard.

He lit on his feet, but before he could start to run Mercy had gripped him firmly by one large tender ear.

"Don't you dast touch me! Don't you dast smack me! I'll tell my paw on you——"

"You need not. I shall tell him myself, if I think best." Mercy's fingers were soft as silk, but they held that crimson ear with a merciless grip. "March, now."

Mercy trod demurely up the lane. On one side there dragged and wailed and fought Josiah. On the other danced and shouted the cruelly joyful Seth. Straight on went Mercy, straight into the clump of little boys, who a moment since had gazed in admiration on their Goliath, now, alas,

in thrall beneath a woman's brutal thumb. They started to run, but Mercy motioned them back.

"Stay here, boys. Josiah has something to say to you."

"I won't—"

"Josiah is sorry he spoke so rudely to Seth. Say it, Josiah."

"I won't, I tell you."

"Say it."

Josiah began to blubber.

"I have plenty of time, Josiah. We'll stay here till supper-time, if you like."

The perfidious little boys began to squeak and gibber with delight. They danced and circled around Josiah, they jeered and hooted.

Mercy stood, an inexorable Patience on her monument.

"Listen, Mercy." Seth stopped, paled. "There's a whole parcel of folks, coming up Stafford Hill. They'll all see you—"

Mercy turned still paler.

"Folks coming—and they'll see— Oh! And won't they stare!" She quaked. Her mouth grew dry with terror. But grimly she stood her ground.

"I think I see your father coming, Josiah. And Parson Avery. And Professor Ames, from the 'Cademy—"

Josiah turned white to his white eye-winkers.

"Pa says he'll lick me, next fight I get into— Oh, turn me loose!"

Mercy beckoned the little boys. Wan silence fell upon them.

"Want to apologize now, Josiah? Say, 'I beg your pardon, Seth.' "

Josiah squirmed and mumbled and snuffled. Finally he screwed out the loathed words.

"Now, one thing more. Say, 'I take back what I said about your father—'"

"I won't!"

"Very well. We'll wait right here."

"Take it back, take it back——"

Mercy let go.

Down the path shot Josiah like a tow-headed bullet. After him pelted a string of taunting small fry. By Providential chance, Adoniram and Thomas had trotted up the lane, just in time for the climax. Round and round Mercy they pranced, three ecstatic young dervishes.

"Boys, stop it. This minute. Not one word to Father. Mind, now!"

The faithful subsided.

Mercy then went home, to give humble ear to Aunt Celestia's observations concerning unwomanly females who would cause their remotest forbears to rise from their graves for horror and for shame. Nobly the little boys kept silence. At least, until Mercy had taken herself demurely to prayer-meeting. Then mortal bonds cracked under the strain.

"And she stood there, and held him tight by his big red ear——" thus Thomas. "And says she, 'Pologize. And take back what you said about Father.' And he done it. Gosh, but he hipered out of there! He didn't lose one second!"

"So Josiah called me a Black Republican. And Mercy made him take it back." Mr. Stafford tried to laugh. But he was preposterously hurt. So Mercy was ashamed of his profound convictions, ashamed of the faith that was as his breath of life!

All his small world stood against him, he thought, wryly. Aunty, patient, loyal, tranquilly contemptuous; Joel, his Benjamin, who, trapped in the labyrinth of his own blunders, could pause in the very face of hazard, to jibe; Emerson, his life-long friend, who, for all his affection, yet held aloof. Nobody had ever understood. Not even his young

wife. She had sat by, her babies' silky heads nestled on her deep young breast, and she had wondered at him and adored him and never, in her beautiful and beloved days, had she understood him. No. Not one of all his house would ever understand.

Meanwhile, Mercy and Lucinda sat as demure as two ringleted, hoopskirted angels in the high-shouldered Stafford pew. Mercy had spent an hour memorizing her chapter, but it grew dim before the vision across the aisle. For there, seated in a calm but tremulous row, she beheld Eliphilet Kimball, Amariah Prescott, and Lemuel G. Crowther. To be sure, she never glanced their way. Even a fleeting glimmer would have been most immodest. But inwardly she was planning what would happen as soon as the benediction was spoken. Although she and Lucinda had come to meeting together, they would not thus depart. Far from it. Directly after Parson had dismissed them, Lucinda would giggle and simper. She would seize on the arm of Rodolphus Applebee, one of the stuttering Applebees from North Fitchburg, before he'd had time to gasp out his invitation, and away they would go, down the dark maple lanes to Lucinda's house. Meanwhile three bashful cavaliers would stand before Mercy. Small use to choose between them, she thought, dismally. Eliphilet would turn red as a turkey gobbler, and blurt out: "May I—haveth' honor t'see y'home?" in a stern but skittish bass. Amariah would choke and fall over his own large feet. Lemuel would fix his pale blue eyes on hers, and the sweat would stream down his cheeks, and he would grab out a large red handkerchief, thus releasing a veritable cloud of bergamot, and look like a terrified but resolute rabbit. But Lemuel was the best of the lot. It might as well be Lemuel.

Prayer-meeting went on and on. At last the final hymn

was sung. The neighborly groups chatted, then went their ways. Lucinda and her Rodolphus had departed, leaving only a trail of giggle, a wake of stutter, on the starlit air. Lemuel, shivering but unflinching, was walking close to her side. There burned in Lemuel's eyes an honest young devotion.

"M-Mercy Rose——"

Mercy turned and looked at him. In the shadows his roach loomed, magnificent. For an instant, it was as if there flashed on his brow the glint of a silver casque. And for once in his mortal days, he was not chewing sassafras.

"What is it, Lemuel?"

Then Lemuel, the blood beating high in his honest boy heart, his hot hands shaking, put both his warm clumsy arms around her, and touched his lips an instant to her cheek. With the movement, he set free an all but deafening blast of bergamot. But, mysteriously, he ceased right then to be a lumpy cub, and became by virtue of some kindly necromancy the Prince, the very Knight of Dream. . . .

"What can keep Mercy so long? Prayer-meeting must have been dismissed an hour ago."

Aunty sniffed. A sniff of chilly wisdom.

"H'm. You let her go yourself."

"Why not? Surely she's safe there!"

"Safe enough. Too safe."

"What can you mean, Aunty?"

"Haven't you seen that great sawney of a Lemuel G. Crowther, making sheep's eyes at her?"

"Lemuel G. Crowther! The last time I laid eyes on him, he was hanging by the band of his petticoats to Deacon Kimball's cherry tree. Right over the brook, and bawling bloody murder. I hauled him down, but I laughed so, I all but dropped him into the brook."

"Lemuel isn't hanging from the cherry tree now. He's hanging around Mercy. Every minute."

"The great simpleton! Mercy will make short shrift of him."

"Maybe so. Maybe not."

A queer shiver ran down Father's neck.

"Nonsense. She wouldn't even look at him. She's nothing but a baby."

"She's close on sixteen. Her mother married you when she wasn't quite seventeen."

Father shrugged, indifferent and amused. He picked up his new *Atlantic World*. He did not turn a page for perhaps the next half hour.

Finally Mercy's light step came up the portico. Her father glanced up casually.

He felt her slim little body lean against him. He slid his arm around her, still casually. He looked into her grave exquisite little face. The face of Kilmeny, returned from a far country, its radiance still upon her.

His heart shut like a fist with a wrench of rage and terror. Bitter, pitiful father-terror. Here she stood, her soft hand folded in his own, her cheek to his. And she might have been a thousand miles away.

Father did not fall asleep readily that night. It was past three when he finally slipped off. He awoke in the vague dawn to the clink of pebbles on his window, the sound of a low hurrying voice.

"John! John! Come down, quick. It's Joel. Quick, I say!"

Father ran down silently. In the gray light, Joel's face was pinched and drawn with fear.

"The bank has found out. Frank Upham got wind of it, and warned me. What can I do, John? Help me."

"The bank—Joel! What do you mean? What have you done?"

But even as he spoke, Father had turned and was stumbling up the stairs. He snatched his gold belt from the dresser, tore down again.

"Here is every cent in this house, Joel. I'll rush all I can get from the bank here, to you, and get it off the first thing in the morning. Where are you going, boy?"

"How do I know? I've got to get away, that's all I know. I'll pay back the money. Tell them that, will you? Tell them I—tell them we'll make good. But I must be off now. God bless you, John. Good-by."

CHAPTER FIVE

FATHER was going traveling! He would take Button and the chaise and drive to Concord, and visit Mr. Emerson, and stay two days and two nights! This was a notable event. For while Mr. Emerson stopped at their house whenever his lecture trips brought him near, Father rarely found time to go to Concord. His work for the *Intelligence* and the management of his farms kept him close at home. But at nineteen, Mr. Emerson had been head usher in Dr. Ripley's school at Waltham. To Father, aged twelve, this gentle quizzical young tutor had embodied all wisdom. In every real crisis, Father turned to Mr. Emerson for encouragement as well as for advice.

The little boys stood around large-eyed and wistful and watched Father make ready. But only Mercy would go. Father was grimly definite on that point. He and Mr. Emerson had urgent matters to talk over, and he would have no time to fish Seth out of Concord Pond, or to plaster mud on Adoniram's bee-stings, or to sit up nights with Thomas and the croup and the goose-grease.

From this decree, there was no hope of yielding. But while the little boys were mournful, Aunty was sniffy. Extremely sniffy.

"Just like a man. Thinks he's got to go consult with Mr. Emerson, every whip-stitch, or the world will quit going around. Thinks his Concord friends hung up the sun and moon. Yet not one of 'em is even halfway orthodox. Mr. Emerson started out to be a middling good preacher, but he must go traipsing off to Italy and all such Papish countries, and he came back all led astray, and

far's I can see he has turned out no better than an infidel. And Nate Hawthorne's folks, I knew well. Fine, dependable people as ever trod shoe-leather. But look at him! Lets his good Custom-house job go, and drizzles around, writing sinful novels! As for Horace Mann, your father bows down to him like he's the Lord's Anointed. Yet he's nothing but a schoolmaster, and a flighty schoolmaster, at that. Mind you, the selectmen gave him the finest office in all Boston. Accept it? Not he. He posts off to that muddy little Ohio town, and sets up a college right in the wilderness. Latin and Greek, for folks that are so torn-down poor, they've got to scratch gravel, so's to earn corn-meal and side-meat. Pity knows, he'd ought to put a plow-handle in their hands, instead of a parcel of pagan books. And Mrs. Mann goes right along with him, down to that wilderness, and pretends she likes it! Poor deluded woman! I tell you, Mercy Rose, men-folks are a terrible responsibility."

Mercy was not greatly burdened by this warning. She was rosy with satisfaction. It was thrilling to put on her shirred sky-blue calash and her gray taffeta with the pinked ruffles, and her prunella boots, and go traveling with Father. But she was puzzled, dismayed, even. Never had she seen her father so worn and tense, so harassed, so irritable.

"Well! Can it be that we are actually ready,—at last? Listen, Aunty, we are not starting for the North Pole. We do not need provisions for six months. Now, my sons, obey your Aunt—— Where is Thomas, pray tell? Find him, Seth, and be quick about it—— Oh, tell him good-by for us. I'll not wait another minute."

Button stepped off briskly. Two doleful faces and one stern disapproving one watched them down Stafford Hill.

Once started, Father relaxed a shade. But only a shade. With steadfast will, with hard determination, he was charting a long course, through clouds of uncertainty, past

shoals of indecision. The menace of poverty, the loss of opportunity, failure in the eyes of his small world; for the sake of his great aim, he could face them all, without a whimper. But when he thought of his children, his trusting little sons, his daughter, child of his heart: could he ask them to face this strange, difficult new life with him?

He glanced at Mercy.

Mercy wore her Kilmeny look. She had not looked his way. She had not said one word.

Father's eyes grew baffled and angry. Always Mercy's door had stood wide open to him. To-day her door was shut. And out of all the inhabitants of the known world, it must needs be shut by the large freckled paw of that unspeakable oaf, Lemuel G. Crowther.

Then over Father's drawn face there came a slow, consoling grin.

"There is always a silver lining," he said to himself. "Even though I must sell all I possess, to help Joel, although I'm taking my Mercy away from her home and from all the small womanly advantages—at least I am taking her away from Lemuel G. Crowther! And once I get her away, she will forget him, fast enough! She shall have a chance at youth, my good dear child, she shall hold fast to her girlhood a while longer. To save my daughter from such a ridiculously early marriage, a marriage to such a hapless young booby— Well! Even such a calamity as mine has its compensations."

Something stirred in the straw under the chaise seat. There came a muffled but terrific sneeze.

"My goodness gracious! That sneeze came from right under-foot!— *Thomas Chalmers Stafford!*"

Red and choking, out crawled the stowaway. Father seized a fat leg, hauled out his youngest, and set him right-side-up in the road.

"My son, I am surprised at you. March home. At once. Tell Aunty that you are to go to bed for the rest of the day."

"Yeth, thir."

"You are to have bread and water for dinner. And bread and water for supper."

"Yeth, thir."

Thomas's corn-silk head drooped. But he took it like a soldier. He put up his hands.

"Please give me your pond-lily carpet bag. I bringed my nighty in it. I thought maybe—maybe I'd need it to-night."

Father dug through the straw till he found the pond-lily bag, a dingy relic adorned with large grimy lilies and poison-green leaves. As he set it down, the bag yawped like a catfish. To the casual glance appeared Thomas's woolly yellow drawers, a Gargantuan hair-brush, his Testament, three apples and a half-eaten chunk of pound cake, and the somewhat disarranged innards of Seth's pocket rifle, which had given up the ghost last Fourth of July. When journeying through savage country, it is well to go armed and well prepared.

Father gazed at the blue distant hills. Life is hard on a conscientious parent who is bedeviled by an untimely sense of humor.

That delay before execution was too much. Thomas gasped aloud. His brown eyes popped. Beads of sweat gathered across his fat little nose.

"Oh, Father! Oh, sister Mercy! Oh, I want to go, so awful bad! And I haven't been anywhere for years and years, and I've been a good boy for ever and ever so long——"

That was the end of Mercy. Little Thomas was so very small, so very fat, so pitiful in his pleading! Little Thomas, to walk back alone, those four long hilly miles!

"Oh, please, Father! His legs are so short, and he's so pudgy, and maybe a bear or an Indian—or—or—gypsies——"

Father did not turn his head.

Thomas took a fresh grip on himself. He swallowed his tears, swung the heavy bag over his shoulder, and set off up hill.

Not a word from Father. He stood looking after that chubby malefactor, trudging grittily on his way.

Never in all her life had Mercy questioned Father's judgments. But now——

"*Please*, Father! He can sit by my chair at dinner, so I can pinch him if he starts gobbling. And he can sleep with me, and I'll keep him scrubbed up. You could see he'd tried to wash his ears. There was a clean streak right back of his ears——"

"Thomas!"

Thomas wheeled like an automaton.

"Thomas, your sister has asked me to overlook this disobedience. We will defer your punishment till we return home. Hop in. No, stop hugging me. *Will* you take your feet off that laprobe? Don't tickle Button's ears with the whip. Nonsense, you can't need a sandwich. It's barely nine o'clock——"

Oh, memorable journey! True, they ate their lunch by the roadside, picnic fashion. But they slept in a Boston hotel, a real hotel, exactly as if they were honest-to-goodness travelers. And the day at Mr. Emerson's promised pure delight. Noon dinner would be something of an ordeal, though, for Mr. Emerson had bidden several illustrious friends to meet Father. There would be the eminent merchant-philanthropist from Boston, Mr. Lucius Searle, tall, magisterial, imperious. There would be Mr. Horace Mann, so gracious, so gentle, yet ground to a wire edge, so des-

perately intent upon his plans for his struggling little college, so cruelly tired. There would be Mr. Alcott, sound and sweet as a ripe Spitzenberg apple, benign, visionary, bland. There would be Mr. Hawthorne, who gave up his good steady job to drizzle around and write novels. . . .

She tied Father's stock for him, she scrutinized him as well as Thomas with a stern maternal eye. But Father was impeccable, and the odor of sanctity was thick upon Thomas. He had not stopped with washing his ears; his shining pinkness appeared not only scrubbed but scalded and scraped.

Suddenly shy, she did not go downstairs till the last moment. When she slipped in, the little brother clinging to her hand, and made her swooping curtsey, the men rose to welcome her, but they did not greet her gayly. They looked on her with the tenderness, the reverence, even, that men accord the daughter who struggles, no matter how clumsily, to take her mother's place.

"Where is Nate?" asked Mr. Mann.

"I suppose he had one of his panics. Mr. Hawthorne would face a regiment single-handed, rather than a roomful of company." Mr. Emerson, lean, stooped, caustic, gave his faint caustic smile.

The dinner, which had set sail upon a pleasant sea of light talk, suddenly found itself grazing reefs of argument.

"Why this haste, Mr. Stafford, sir?" Thus the majestic Mr. Searle. "The Almighty, wise men tell us, gives centuries to the perfection of His slightest creation. Why then, so urge on this reform——"

Father's stock shot under his left ear.

"Because, Sir, we Abolitionists are not the Almighty. We are not trying to perfect, but to abolish—to abolish the evil which our ancestors left us, their vile heritage. That evil had its roots in the day when they set out to

trade rum for slaves, to debauch the North, their own land, as well as to ruin the South——”

“*Our* ancestors, Sir? I ask you to retract that. My own were never guilty of that vicious trade.”

In rushed Mr. Emerson with a small and inefficient olive branch.

“Oh, when it comes to that, we’re all tarred with the same stick——”

“Not all of us.” Mr. Searle held grimly to his point, the autocrat that he was. “Moreover, it is not for us to vaunt our own judgment above a loftier decree. Slavery has always existed. It will always exist. It stands before our eyes, an eternal punishment to an erring race——”

“While we, the self-anointed righteous, profit by that punishment——” Father choked.

Mr. Alcott looked across at him with shining, kind eyes, ineffably complacent, immutably bland.

“Education, my dear Mr. Stafford. Education! Light in darkness. There lies the true solution to these problems. Inform and clarify the public mind. Replace its base ideals with loftier motives——”

“Put aside the question of slavery till we have freed those who lie in bonds of prisoning thought.” Mr. Emerson spoke gently, as always. But Father winced under that gentle finality.

Baffled, defeated, put aside like a blundering child by this council of his mild, indulgent elders, Father slumped back into his chair.

No. Not one of them would ever realize. Not one among them would ever understand.

Dinner was ended. Up rose Mrs. Emerson, so frail, so gentle, so serene, and gathered up Thomas, now a solid lump of sleep, and carried him to her own room.

“He can play with the little children when he wakens,”

she told Mercy, gently. "You go and visit with the Alcotts, dear. They'll be so glad to have you. Stay to supper, if you like."

Away ran Mercy to the beloved Alcotts, for the long afternoon. Nowhere in all her world would she ever find such wild disorder, such threadbare poverty, such golden welcome. Louisa was at home for a two days' rest from her grinding hard teaching in Boston. Dear merry Louisa, with her gaunt tired eyes and her inky fingers and her eager clumsy hands, that tried always to do every loving service for you, and never did anything just right.

Shining with hospitable love, the family welcomed Mercy. May, daubed in paint, found a clamshell and before Mercy's ravished eyes painted for her a tiny landscape. Mrs. Alcott taught her a new embroidery stitch. And after supper Louisa, bent on crowning the day with roses, read aloud a chapter from her new novel; a harrowing tale, entitled *The Maniac's Bride*. No wonder that Mercy stayed on and on, forgetting even little Thomas in her rare freedom.

Finally she glanced at the tall clock.

"Ten o'clock! My gracious! No, no, don't come with me. I know every step. Good-night!"

She sped away, regardless of kind protesting voices. She knew the paths well. But as she raced down the dark, tree-shadowed paths, she grew bewildered. "I must take the first turn in the road," she thought. Now, surely this was the first turn. But how queer and unfamiliar it felt! The wavering shadows baffled her. The gravel felt strange beneath her feet.

She looked up. To the east, through the black lace of the elms, glimmered a waning moon. Across it, ghosts from an enchanter fleeing, blew shreds of watery mist. At her

feet, like tired little wraiths, fluttered the autumn leaves, all their brave gold and scarlet dimmed in that pale light to pitiful gray. A small cold fear gripped Mercy's heart. By day these woodland roads were all so safe, so cheerful! But by night. . . .

Something stirred in the hedge. Something dark, yet fitfully seen against the night. Light feet prowled deep in the hedge shadow, light steps crept nearer, nearer. What was that sound, so eerie on the thin chill air? A whimper? A chuckle?

Mercy would have given her soul to run and scream. But not Mercy Rose Stafford. Never.

The velvet step came closer. The chuckle broke in a whine, a wail. . . .

Mercy tore down the black road like a mad thing. She was so blind, so crazed with fear, that when strong hands caught her, and a kind voice spoke with quick reassurance, she could not even hear. She did not scream. But she fought like a little tigress. But the big hands drew her up and planted her against a tree-trunk, and the kind voice spoke on, so gently: "Why, it's just a little girl! Whew, you struck out like a—a gladiator! My child, don't be afraid. Everybody knows me. My name is Hawthorne."

"Oh-h!" Mercy clutched a moment at those big hands. Then, very disposedly, she smoothed down her hoops, and straightened her flapping calash. "I regret that I have troubled you——"

She stopped on a gulp that threatened to engulf her.

"There, don't talk." Hawthorne fell into step beside her. He was as gentle as her own father, yet as aloof now as if he stood upon the farthest star. "No wonder you were alarmed. That wail is popularly supposed to freeze one's blood. The animal is young Augustus Seabury's tame lynx.

He has taught it to trot after him and howl, in which event he gives it a lump of sugar. Hence the creature's unwelcome attentions to you."

Mercy essayed a wan giggle. This satisfied Mr. Hawthorne. He dropped her hand and went cruising off down the misty lanes. Having done his Christian duty, he would now turn to his own diversions.

"Anyway, he's as good as gold, to take me home," Mercy reflected. But in a few minutes, he was back again. Without a word, he thrust something into her hand.

It was a handful of mint, dew-wet, spicy-fragrant.

Mercy gripped it, tight. The last gulp vanished into limbo. Any other man would have spoken on and on, with soothing, exasperating reassurance. But this sylvan shy creature knew a better comforter than words. The mystic in him spoke in that wild healing fragrance.

Now they turned into Mr. Emerson's yard. The front door opened. Now Mr. Emerson, his clear, quizzical face lighted by the tall whale-oil lamp in his hand, was welcoming them in.

"Come right in, Mr. Hawthorne. Don't look apprehensive. No company. Just ourselves."

"Well." Hawthorne entered, wary as a stag. He shook hands with Father, then slid past the two men and settled himself in a dusky corner. Only his hands moved. For he had pulled a handful of ribbon-grass, and as he sat there, his long fingers wove and wove. Deftly, absently, they twisted the shreds of cream and emerald and dark sea-green into a strange design. It was as though he wound the threads in a fantastic arras. Could you but see that arras through his own eyes, what weird and tragic beauty! A girl, her child caught high in both frail arms, the baby's fingers tugging at the broad scarlet A on the mother's

breast. A boy's face, gay as a young Bacchus, wreathed with vine leaves that could not quite hide the leaf-like ear.

And through and through the quiet of the evening, Father and Mr. Emerson were weaving, too. Only they wove with slow, inexorable words. And with those words they wove the cloth of destiny.

Mercy tried to keep politely awake. But she was leaden with sleep. The voices faded, dimmed.

"Well, Stafford, we have talked this over from A to Z. I cannot say I'm in full accord with your plans. But you know I have every confidence in you, and since you seem determined to leave Massachusetts and make a fresh start——"

"Precisely what I mean to do, Mr. Emerson. And I shall sell my land here, all of it, and emigrate within a month's time. Emigrate to Bakerstown, Illinois. It is a thriving village near Springfield. Deacon Heber Lyman has just returned from a visit to his twin brother, Timothy, who has settled there. He tells me that the town is split into two camps, the abolitionists and the anti-agitation men. Not pro-slavery, this second group, but those who are violently opposed to any agitation. You know. The cat-footed sort,—neither afoot nor a'horseback. For a while they had an abolition weekly of their own, but when Lovejoy was murdered and his press destroyed the editor got scared and fled the country. So I shall take what I can get for my farms, and for the home place, and go. Timothy Lyman will pick out a small farm for me near the town. I'll buy that abandoned press and start the anti-slavery weekly again. That will give us our bread and butter. Then I shall find good helpers to run the farm. The outdoor life will be fine for the little boys.

"As for Mercy—for Mercy, I realize that such a change

will bring its trials. At all events, she will be quite as well off in Illinois for the present. I prefer to take her out of certain—influences."

"But what about your newspaper work here with the *Intelligence*—"

Father's tired face blazed.

"The *Intelligence*? Let me tell you that the *Intelligence* has practically kicked me out. I am too radical, too forth-putting, for the paper's policy. Green River subscribers have threatened to cancel their subscriptions, I am informed, unless my articles are toned down, made less annoying to my townsmen. I've known for a long time that I and my Black Republican ideas were a Green River disgrace—"

"If you feel you must move away from Green River, why not go to New York? Mr. Greeley—"

"Mr. Greeley has made me an excellent offer. But I would be hampered there, precisely as I am hampered here. No, I must strike out for myself. I must complete the work that I know is allotted to me."

"But listen, Stafford. You don't understand what you are attempting. Your farm will be no help to you. Instead, you'll be lucky if it does not prove a dead weight. Out west, competent farm help is impossible to find. As for breaking a prairie farm yourself, you're about as well qualified for such terrific work as I am. A wild young country will yield her riches only to men of force and power and youth. Where, in your household, will you find one such worker. You yourself will be tied down by your newspaper. Your sons are too young. If your brother Joel would go with you, and give his strength—"

"I can hardly expect such aid from Joel." A curious seared look came on Father's face.

"And when you think of your young family. . . . Forgive me, Stafford, but is this plan quite just to them?"

“‘Hostages to fortune——’” Father put out his hand to his sleeping girl. “I know, Mr. Emerson. You are right. But—man, can’t you see? Can’t you understand? This work has been laid on me, as the old-time folks used to say. I dare not hold back. I cannot. It’s my work. It is my allotted task. How dare I withdraw my hand from the plow?”

There was a long silence.

“I know I am making the right decision. The only choice for me to make. Yet——” Father flinched, then, and his drawn face reddened miserably. “Yet—oh, Lord, how I wish that a man could set out to do his nation a service without feeling himself such an infernal prig!”

Mr. Emerson nodded. Into his blue impenetrable eyes crept that slow caustic smile.

“That is the immemorial curse upon the preacher. Who are you, says your world, to set yourself up as a judge, a reformer—odious word! Nobody jeers at the man who fights for his country. Everybody jeers at the man who, forced to see the dangers that menace his country, dares to point out those dangers, urge a remedy. No, Stafford, you won’t have even the satisfaction of feeling that you are a martyr to your noble faith. Martyr, forsooth! You’ll be a dreary nuisance. And when you have given your all, when you have laid down body and soul, some worthy citizen will come along and turn you out. Because, like Aristides’ critic, he is tired of hearing you called *The Just*.”

There fell another silence. But at last Mr. Emerson spoke again.

“To be sure, Stafford, there is another side to this. Once in an æon, your words may strike home to some man, drive your truth deep into his mind and heart. This man, having listened and believed, may pass your word along. Then, if enough men listen, if enough men pass your word along——”

Father sprang to his feet. His worn face was aglow.

"There you are! If I can hope to reach just one man, Mr. Emerson! A man who will have the judgment, the cold reason, the unswerving will——"

Then Mr. Emerson lifted his face to the light. And like a stronger, clearer light, came his slow musing answer.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men——" Yes, Stafford, and there is a tide in men themselves. Humanity is at a low ebb. The time is ripe for a high-tide man. A man who does not know fear, who, once his course is set, can never yield. If you can reach that man, if you can open his way for him, if you can hold up your torch for him, even for one hour——"

Shivering, numb with sleep, Mercy dragged herself awake and stumbled up the stairs. She tiptoed to Thomas's cot to make sure he was tucked in tight. Alas, even as she bent above him, her ears were greeted by a heart-shattering whoop. Poor little Thomas had fallen from grace. Against all commands, he had spent half the afternoon wading in Concord Pond, and he was close on suffocation. Patient Mrs. Emerson hurried up, bringing all the supererogatory horrors of croup, in so many black bottles. Father and Mr. Emerson came on the jump, and Father said sternly that this served Thomas quite right, and that he richly deserved it, and then melted considerably, after the manner of fathers, when the small, struggling, gasping creature flung up drowning arms and clutched him for its life.

But finally the cruel grip loosened on the chunky little throat, and Thomas toppled back, dead asleep, into his sister's arms. And the next morning the criminal was driven home in sackcloth and ashes, to say nothing of the leg of Mr. Emerson's red-flannel drawers, wrapped tight around his neck, to hold fast the fat bacon rind which was Mrs.

Emerson's final prescription. And the days that followed were so filled with wonders that it was not till many years had passed that Mercy remembered that hour in the quiet white-walled study. She was a woman grown before there came to her the memory of those slow poignant words:

—"If I can reach just one man——"

"If you can open his way for him, if you can hold up your torch for him, for even one hour——"

CHAPTER SIX

MERCY raced up the long hill to Aunt Celestia's. The September wind, cool and sweet and rowdy as March, ran with her. It pulled and tweaked the silver-gilt rings that it had snatched loose from her net, it tossed her wide-flowing dimity sleeves, it flung her hoops impudently sidewise till she felt like a runaway balloon. But faster than the wind she flew. Hurry, hurry, hurry! She was breathless, she was bursting with her news when she hurled herself into Aunty's keepin' room.

To come into that room was to come into a dusky, stuffy worsted-work cave; its ceiling all hung with stalactites of jingling bead-and-yarn tassels and cardboard aircastles and rainbow prisms, its floor cluttered with stalagmites of small, treacherous footstools, topped by life-size satin-stitch cats. All the chairs toed the line, wearing starched and slippery tidies like so many meek little orphans in spotless pinnafores. The high board mantel wore not only a white pinafore but a long glittering overskirt of bead fringe, reminiscent of the cannibal ladies in *Tales from Heathen Lands* which adorned the inlaid ebony center-table. The cage for Zenobia, the macaw, was draped in a modest bead ruffle. Even the tall whale-oil lamp on the desk was flounced and corseted with beads of every hue. The only object in that room that didn't wear beads was Cyrus.

Cyrus, Aunty's ancient Chinese carp, considerably overweight and of a morose and disdainful disposition, swam languidly round and round his globe, unadorned. However, as Seth had once remarked, Cyrus wore side-whiskers exactly like the precentor's. And his globe stood on a cro-

cheted thread mat of red-white-and-green, fine as cobweb, with every point in its leaf border tipped by a diamond-drop crystal.

“Aunty, where are you? Quick!”

Aunty appeared from her bedroom wrapped in Joseph's Coat. Joseph's Coat was not only a family relic. It was a family tree. It was what a later generation would call a lounging robe, only Aunty never lounged at all. In designing it, her flair for thrift had held full sway. Set on a foundation of faded old cherry paduasoy, it was built of many-colored patches joined with featherstitching. Affectionately your eye recognized the raiment of three generations past.

There was Grandfather Huntingdon's wedding waistcoat of white plush with embossed wreaths now yellowed to ivory. There were scraps of heavy amber brocade, Great-aunt Davenport's Josephine gown in which she had trailed like an amber bird-of-paradise at the Peace Ball. There were slab-sided chunks of Father's wedding coat. That coat would have made small pantaloons for ages to come, if mice hadn't found it precisely the thing for crib linings. There was a scrap of blue cloth striped with tarnished gold braid cut from the small but gallant trousers of Second-cousin David, worn in the days when, a commissioned officer aged twelve, he strode the *Essex* quarter-deck beside Admiral Porter. There were artless scarlet high-lights cut from portions of the little boys' outgrown woolen underwear. And Mercy's scalp always prickled slightly when she viewed a large pentagon of somber black plush; a scrap salvaged from Great-Uncle Jonathan's coffin lining.

Aunty gazed on her rebukingly.

“Mercy Rose Stafford, what in time is the matter with you? You scared me out of a year's growth. I all but swallowed my lower plate.”

"Oh, Aunty, we're going West. To stay forever!"

Aunty sat down suddenly.

"Whatever in calamity——"

"Away out to Illinois. Father had a letter from Deacon Lyman's brother. He has bought us a fine little farm, and father has sent him the money to buy the town printing-press, too. Yes, and Lucinda's pa wants to buy our place here, house and orchard and farms and all. And father says we'll start soon as ever he can buy a good Conestoga and a wagon-team. Of course we could go on the railroad, part way, but father thinks the little boys will have such a royal time camping out. Oh, isn't it grand!"

Aunty did not look so very uplifted. She sat very white and still. Her strong old hands shook on her knee.

"This is part and parcel of John's anti-slavery doin's," she said, when she could speak. "Bought a farm, sight unseen. Pig in a poke, most like. I'll wager it hasn't even a good well on it."

"Oh, but, Aunty, it has a wonderful one. It's an ever-flowing spring, and it never was known to go dry. That's one reason why father wrote Mr. Timothy to go right ahead and buy it."

Aunty merely snorted.

"And sent money for a printing press. Mess of rust, of course. Stafford, all over. And why hasn't he been up to tell me, himself?"

"He couldn't. Everything happened this morning. All at once. He'll be up to-night as soon as supper is finished."

"Is your father aimin' to take all your furniture? The portraits, too?"

"No, he'll sell most of the things. It costs too much to carry them along. But the portraits we'll take, and the linen and silver."

"H'm. If your grandfather goes, wall-eye and all, I plan to take everything I've got. 'Specially Cyrus."

"Aunty! You don't mean you'd go with us?"

"Think you could leave me behind?"

"Oh, Aunty, you precious! I might have known you'd stand by."

"Only thing that would make me hang back, is how Cyrus will take it. Illinois water may be different from New England spring water. It won't be easy for him to change. If I dragged that poor fish out west and made him miserable for the rest of his days, I'd never forgive myself."

"Oh, Cyrus will love it." Mercy tapped the globe with a beguiling finger. Cyrus responded with a chill glare, and an insolent twirl of his muttonchop whiskers. He then swam churlishly away, and retired to the dungeon of his castle.

"'Pears like he understood every word we say. And he doesn't like it."

"Oh, he'll perk up, once we start," Mercy assured her hurriedly.

"Mind you send your father up, the minute he comes home. I've got some questions to ask him."

But when John Stafford came up the petunia path, Aunty asked only one question.

"John, can you tell me one thing? Do you feel you have a call to this work? That you—that you've *got it to do?*"

"Aunty, I *know*. It stares me in the face night and day. If just I'm given the power to carry it through!"

Aunty swallowed hard. All her safe, small world pitched into ruin. The very walls of her life were toppling around her.

"That settles it, John. I go with you. And I stay by."

Aunty, all over. Never for an hour could she comprehend John's aims. But being Aunty, she was faithful. That

faithfulness was her pillar of cloud by day, her pillar of fire by night. She put on the whole armor of loyalty. She girded on her three alpaca petticoats and her brass-bound specks and her plumed and intimidating bonnet. She packed her squatly little sole-leather trunk, broken out in a permanent rash of brass nails, she bought a costly new copper kettle for Cyrus' traveling carriage and sewed her ancient purple nuby into a cover for Zenobia's cage. She broke all her contented old ties without a murmur.

Another woman might have said to herself, "Fruitless, piteous folly. But to this man, here stands his mighty hope. So stand back. Let him follow his dream." But no such deep understanding sustained Aunty. Her loyalty was the more deeply loyal because she did not ask to understand, but only to serve.

Breaking up the home of a lifetime is a dreary process. Aunty aged daily. Even Father wore to a raw edge. Only to the little boys were these hurried days a wonder and an ecstasy. Injuns, bears and catamounts! Bronzed scouts, stern spies, grim feathered red-skins draped in scalps, lined the roads in endless procession from Green River, Massachusetts, to Bakerstown, Illinois! An enterprising arrow which took Deacon Jedediah Perkins in the small of the back and all but suspended negotiations on the sale of the homestead, put a check on Seth's bloodthirsty career; but little Thomas slew his thousands daily. Mercy complained that she waded in gore.

Mercy was having troubles of her own. Lemuel, dismayed by impending separation, begged her to be really engaged to him. "Wear my ring, Mercy. I've got an elegant one, half paid for, down at the postoffice store. Cost me a dollar and fifty cents. Once we tell them we're engaged, your father and mine can't say anything."

Mercy, however, felt that they could say aplenty. Es-

pecially her own father. It would hurt him, too. Hurt him cruelly.

"I think it would be piggy not to tell Father all about it first. And your own father would be mad as hops."

"Well, just as you say." Lemuel sighed. "But it's going to be terrible hard on me. Engaged to a girl out West, so I dassent so much as go to singing school with any of the girls here. Yet I won't even have the satisfaction of saying I'm tied up to you. Can't you see that?"

"'Tied up——'" Mercy tried the words over. Somehow they sounded very queer indeed. Not so very knightly either. Still, any knight must needs be allowed to relax at times.

Lemuel had relaxed a good deal. He was nailing up packing boxes for Aunty. His brow was wet with honest sweat, his sleeves were rolled up over grimy arms, the seat of his blue jeans breeches gave back a radiance that outshone the sun, for Aunty had been regilding Zenobia's cage ("Small chance I'll find any gold paint in all that wilderness!") and Lemuel had sat down casually in the gilt.

But a knight is a knight. No matter where his effulgence is located for the time being. And the thought of that ring at the postoffice store, her own engagement ring to be! Mercy yielded.

"W-well. You bring me the ring, and I'll wear it on a ribbon. Around my neck. Under my tucker. It won't mean I am really engaged to you. But you can be engaged to me, and I'll think it over. But neither of us is to tell anybody till we're all ready to get married. Then we'll tell my own father, first of all. Mind that."

"Oh, all right!" Lemuel started to kiss her, then gave an apprehensive glance towards the kitchen door. Between Aunty and the little boys a man never knew when he was safe. "I'll bring your ring to prayer-meeting. And on the way home—— Yes, mom, I just finished the box with the

wax pomegranates. Yes, mom, I packed about a million tidies round 'em, more or less. Yes, mom. You're kindly welcome. Good-by."

Aunty stood frowning wearily. She needed an outlet. She seized on one.

"My land! Seems like my back would break square in two. Mercy, what's come over your hair? It always has some red in it, but to-day it's redder than ever."

That dark red under-gleam was always a chastening. Mercy gave a ferocious tug to the thick braid. "I know. It's getting redder all the time. But what can I do about it?"

"In my day, folks used to say that red hair was a punishment for some transgression away back. Before you were born, maybe."

"But how could I sin before I was born?" Mercy flared up heatedly.

"Don't ask such questions. They come too close to blasphemy."

Mercy reflected. That evening she swooped down on Father. Desperately tired, haggard with discouragement, he was taking out his worry by wrassling with the little boys. Between Aunty's generation and Father's own there lay a gulf as wide as the sea.

"Thomas! Let go Father's ears, I want to ask him a question. Listen, Father. Do you mind it, because I have red hair?"

"Do I mind it—because you have red hair?" Father parted his knees, like a breaking bridge-span. Thomas departed for the floor with a yell of terrified joy that jarred the rafters. "What on earth—"

"Aunty says—"

"Mind it—mind it?" Stunned, her parent groped for words. "I thought you children had asked all the astound-

ing questions beneath the arched canopy of Heaven, but it appears there are a few left. Why, if you please, should I mind it?" Under his frosty crest, his eyes began to snap. "Why, I gave it to you myself!"

"Why, Father——"

"The first time I ever laid eyes on you, young lady——" Father shook off Seth and Donny and pulled Mercy down on his knee, "you were not a young lady by any means. Far from it. You were just a roll of yellow flannel with a red scallock sticking out of one end and two bright red flat-iron feet out of the other."

"Why, Father——"

"You don't believe me? See here." He tossed her down, too, and went to the dim old eagle mirror. "I have not looked for traces of my long lost beauty, these many years, but perhaps——" He parted his thick silver crest, searched earnestly. "There!"

Under his finger lay a thread or so of glittering red-bronze glinting into silver.

"Why, Father——" Seth stood aghast. "Why, you used to be a red-head, too."

"Certainly I was. A dangerous one at that. Let me show you how savage I used to be."

He grasped Seth by his scant raiment, held him at arm's length, brandished him, squawking. Adoniram and Thomas fell upon their cruel parent from the rear. Ensued a gorgeous mêlée. At the climax fell the doomful voice of Aunty.

"John Stafford! I've just patched Seth's trousers, and you waving him around by the patch! Of all the heathen doings——"

Father's proud crest fell. The little boys made themselves judiciously scarce. But Mercy crowded inwardly. At one fateful stroke Aunty had forsaken her infallibility of

years. So. Red hair was a proof of sin, was it? Yet Father, Father, who could do no wrong, had given it to her!

Being eminently human, the citizens of Green River, once realizing that John Stafford and his family were shaking the Green River dust from their feet, began to hedge and sidle. A bit shamefaced, people stopped him on the street and told him he needn't expect any success in such a wild-goose chase, but wished him good fortune none the less. A steady stream of votive offerings trickled through the kitchen. Father might starve for sympathy in Green River but Green River housewives would never permit him to go hungry for more material food.

Perhaps those who had no farewell gifts to bring, were the most deeply grieved. One afternoon old Captain Jones hobbled up the hill to say good-by.

"Donno's how I'm goin' to make out, once you folks are gone." The Captain's brittle old voice quavered and broke. He looked at Father with dry, despairing old eyes. "Lew, my son-in-law, he says as how he can't leave me have more than two bits a month spending money any more. And he grudges me every mouthful I eat. He even keeps 'count of the sassidges. And they don't give me no feather-bed winters, and nights I plumb freeze. Couldn't you make out to take me along? Yes, I know I'm eighty-five, going on eighty-six, but there's a power of hard work in me yet. I kin chop wood, and churn, and shovel snow; I'll earn my keep, anywheres. Can't you make out to take me along?"

Father couldn't stand out against that.

"We'll manage, somehow," he told Aunt Celestia. "No, there's not an inch of room for him in the carryall. No space in the wagon, either. But I've got to take him along. I won't leave him behind."

"John, we *can't*. He's so feeble right now, he can hardly

shuffle. Listen. You know I've got my eighty dollars a year, interest money. I can easily spare him a dollar a month. We'll fix it so that his tight-fisted son-in-law needn't know one thing."

Father growled, but he yielded with scant argument.

"Gave in and behaved sensible, for once in his life," Aunty remarked to Mercy later. "Sometimes I think that verse in the Bible was writ special about him. 'And that thou takest the needy into thine house.' John would take in the whole world-full of needy folks, if so's he could. He's a good man, Mercy. None better. But I surely am thankful that he has you to take care of him. No matter how good your menfolks are, they're an awful responsibility."

"Everybody comes to see us," wrote Mercy in her diary, "to poke and pry around, and figure out what we're taking along, and find out how much money Father is getting for the farms, and how much he paid for the new place out west, and are we ever coming back, and Well, we do hope you succeed. But no telling. To-day, though, we had two very remarkable visitors. They were old Judge Amberley and Miss Evelina. But they did not come together, and I don't believe that either one knew that the other was coming.

"First came Miss Evelina. She walked up the hill, though nobody ever saw her walk so far before. Always she sits, all primmed up, in the big barouche alongside of her father, and never looks to right nor to left. But this time she came flying up all alone. She looked perfectly beautiful, for she had on an apple-green taffeta dress with rosebuds embroidered on all the flounces, and a great swinging cape of yellow old lace over it, and a bonnet all frills and stiff little cinnamon pinks. But her cheeks were blazing red, and she was out of breath and shaking all over.

"She hardly spoke to Aunty and me. She went straight to Father. He was roping Grandfather Davenport into a Rising Sun quilt but he stopped quick and came straight to her, shirt-sleeves and all.

"'Good morning, Mr. Stafford,' says she, very proud and cool. But she put her hand on his arm, and I could see it tremble. 'I have come to ask a great kindness of you. Will you take me west with you? I wish to remain west permanently.'

"Father's eyes simply popped out. So did Aunty's. So did mine. Then all of a sudden Father said, 'Oh, my dear child!' as if she had told him something, without saying it out loud. Then he put his arm around her and said, so gently, 'But your own father?'

"'My own father—I cannot talk to him. He is kind. But he could never understand. But you——'

"She stopped, and sort of thought it over.

"'Listen. In the past three years I have made eight bead reticules, one with France weeping at the grave of Napoleon on it. I have embroidered three fire screens, and knitted the lace for seven petticoats. I have not stirred abroad, save as I took the air with my father. I have not baked a loaf of bread. I have not fed a child.'

"She stopped right there. Her cheeks were flaming, and she looked as if she was so angry she daren't speak another word. Then——

"'I am only a woman. I know that. But I have the right to live like other women, to work, to do my share——'

"She stopped again.

"Father stood there with his arm around her. He looked sort of white and queer and sorry. At last he said, 'But you cannot hurt your father so. You are his beloved only child. You cannot shame him.'

“Miss Evelina waited till he had finished. Then she pulled herself away from Father, and laughed out loud, right in his face. She drew back, and gave him a great sweeping curtsey.

“‘Men are all alike, when it comes to women. Thank you with all my heart for your stone, Mr. John Stephen Stafford!’

“Then she curtsied to Aunty, and kissed me, and her lips were like ice. And off she went, drifting down the garden like a queen in a fairy book.

“Father stared after her. Then he said, sort of under his breath, ‘But, good God, what can a man do?’

“I thought Aunty would rebuke him for such outrajus language, but she never peeped. She just patted his shoulder, and didn’t say one word. I surely do wish I knew what Miss Evelina meant by giving her a stone, but you may believe I knew better than to ask.

“That very afternoon, Father was down in the home orchard. Giving up the orchard is harder for Father than anything else. He loves it more than the house, even, a thousand times more. I know just how he feels, for the trees are like people to me, too. The apple trees are so motherly, and the pear trees are such fussy conceited things, always showing off, and yet so elegant, you have to treat them like quality, everyone; and the peaches and cherries all bloom in such a rush, like so many excited brides, as if they were head-set on beating each other every year. Father had the little boys with him and they were picking apples, but most of the time Father was being a wild horse of the Pampas, and Thomas was riding him bareback, and the other two were lassoing him with pieces of grapevine.

“Right then up comes Judge Amberley, sitting so straight and stately in his bottle-green barouche, with his black

coachman, all bottle-green, too, perched all high and mighty up aloft.

“When Father saw Judge Amberley, he shucked Thomas off his back, and hurried to meet him.

“Now I thought it was very romantic of Miss Evelina, to want to go West with us, and that maybe the Judge was behaving like a Cruel Parent to her, though you’d never believe that to look at him and, anyway, I thought it would be interesting to listen. But the Judge never once spoke Miss Evelina’s name. I don’t believe he so much as dreamed that she wanted to go West. But he was terribly worked up. He struggled out of the barouche, and he went straight to Father, and gripped Father’s hands hard.

“‘John, my boy, a strange report has come to me. People tell me that you are selling your lands, that you are going West, that you will cast in your lot with the abolitionists. I cannot believe this. Tell me that this is not true. Surely you will not join that pestilent crew.’

“Poor Father, I was so sorry for him. He loves Judge Amberley so dearly. He tried to answer, but he just couldn’t speak. Finally he got it out.

“‘These reports are true, Judge Amberley. I—I’d give anything if you could feel as I do——’

“‘John, you are your father’s son, and as his son, nothing can turn you away from me. But—— Oh, you cannot mean to do this thing! You will not ruin your life, you will not blacken your honored name!’

“‘Judge Amberley’—poor Father, he was shaking all over—‘I must follow the command of my own conscience. Surely you will not cast me out?’

“Judge Amberley tried to speak, but he couldn’t. He just choked up, too, and stood staring at Father. Father put out his hand, but the Judge didn’t see it. He turned to the barouche and held to it a minute, as if he was going

to fall, but he didn't. He pitched and blundered up the steps, and sort of fell back into the seat. And then the bottle-green coachman drove him away.

"He'd hurt Father terribly. I knew that. For a minute, I was so angry I couldn't speak myself. But as the barouche turned down the driveway, I got a good look at his face. My, but he looked so gray and sick and old! And his poor old veiny hands were clutching out, groping out, as if he'd let go of something that he couldn't ever get hold of again.

"I just packed Father's chessmen in the box with the winter flannels. Father says small chance he will find anybody to play chess with out west. But I want him to have them, for when he is tired from writing, an hour of chess rests him so much. Aunty says she has never approved of any game of chance, and she considers that to play chess is to undermine your character, but if she was not seventy-six going on seventy-seven she would try to learn, so's to be company for him. Aunty always smacks you first and then gives you a peppermint afterwards.

"Father has hired Miss Euphemia to make new roundabouts for the little boys, all over brass buttons, and new nankeen pantaloons, and he bought me a fine lilac poplin with green velvet moss trimming, for my very best. He should have bought himself a new great-coat. The one he has is very genteel-looking when he gets it on, but it is so shiny on the seams that Aunty roughs it up with sand-paper every week. I've tried hard to coax him to buy a new one, but he says he cannot afford to this year. I can't understand why he wants to pinch himself like that. He never used to. Of course I know we are not rich folks and never have been, not since Greatgrandfather whiffed everything away. But if Father can afford new clothes for us children, he ought to have some for himself.

"Aunty says his greatcoat cannot be good material, for

any greatcoat ought to last 15 years at the least, and that she has had her paddy-soy mantle for 18, and expects to wear it to the Grave. Aunty is very forehanded. She has her shroud all ready. She let me peek at it. It is India muslin, very fine and sheer, and all embroidered. Grand-father brought it back from Bombay in the *Semiramis*, in 1821. She expects to wear it with three laced petticoats, but no hoops, as she says they are not customary——”

At last the house and the farms were sold. All the money received, except the dangerously small sum that Father held back for his children, had been sent to Joel. Sent through Mr. Emerson, who had paid almost all of it on Joel's debt to the Bank; then he had sent what remained to Joel, through the hands of a trusted friend. It was best to keep Joel's address absolutely secret. The wagons were loaded to the Plimsoll mark. The good-bys were all spoken.

Then, on the very last day, Green River's civic heart melted. Here went its foremost citizen away to a new and lonely world. Green River must rise up and bid him God-speed. Shops closed their doors, and the whole town gathered before the schoolhouse, an awed, sober, friendly crowd.

Up rose the town clerk, his brown wig a bit askew, his voice quivering between upblown importance and sincere emotion. He lifted his hand for silence: from the broad parchment, flourishing scrolls and flutes and flowers that never bloomed by land or sea, he read aloud his tribute:

“We, the men and women of Green River, Massachusetts, in Union and Harmony assembled, do hereby:

“RESOLVE:

“That, since to-day we have gathered to say Farewell to

our friend and fellow-citizen, John Stephen Stafford, and his Family, upon their departure for the Sangamon Country, Illinois: that we hereby tender to them our Generous Hopes, and our Wishes for their Success, their Spiritual and Moral Welfare, and their Longevity. We also

“RESOLVE:

“That we commend them to the Brotherly Kindness of such Communities as they may visit during their Earthly Sojourn:

“We further

“RESOLVE:

“We trust that they may receive, from such Communities, the Hospitality, the Generosity, and the Virtues of Religion of which they themselves have been always such Notable Exponents, and which they are now leaving behind.”

Nobody noticed that startling peroration. Nobody smiled. Father, grim and white, his shaken mouth set hard, clutched Mercy in one hand, held an awed leash of little boys in the other. In three unsteady words, he spoke his gratitude. Then he loaded them into the carryall, Aunty first. On her lap he set the kettle holding the moody Cyrus. Zenobia squawked against her shoulder, Mouser flounced indignantly in her gunny-sack under the front seat. Mercy and the little boys crammed themselves in behind.

Aunty stared ahead, up the peaceful autumn road. Presently she wiped her eyes, drew a long breath.

“Well, John, we’re off.”

“Yes, Aunt Celestia, we’re off. Good fortune go with us.”

Aunty did not reply. She was straining her eyes after the covered wagon, which wallowed ahead like a ship in a heavy sea.

"John Stafford! Who is driving that wagon?"

Again, in its utter guilelessness, Father's face rivaled the Praying Samuel.

"Why, I never thought to tell you. It's old Captain Jones."

"Captain Jones!"

"Yes. I meant to drive the wagon myself, and let Mercy drive the carryall. But I thought it over, and decided I'd give Great-aunt Davenport to the museum, instead of hauling her along to Illinois. That would make room for the Captain. Better take along a live friend than a dead ancestor, any day."

There fell a silence. A terrifying silence.

Then Aunty dug into the depths of her bag. She pulled out a peppermint. She thrust it into Father's hand.

"John," said she, magnanimous in defeat, "have a peppermint!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

A WEEK on the highway, two weeks, and still the golden autumn held like a tranquil charm. The mornings glowed through pearly mists, the days were a chain of amber hours, the evenings fell softly through Indian summer haze, colored like smoky topaz, soft as down. Under that still and gentle sky, Father rested from all his burdened thoughts.

Aunty relaxed, too; at least after the Captain had found a safe hook for Cyrus and his kettle aboard the big wagon, so that she need no longer strain her bony old knees by carrying him, his heavy kettle, and a gallon of his native element. Cyrus was a good traveler, she declared proudly. At least, he never made any complaints. Although he surely had grounds for complaint, for the constant jouncing would have caused sea-sickness in the most accustomed voyager. On rough stretches of road he was not only jounced, he was churned.

“He won’t be a goldfish much longer, he’ll be a butter-fish,” remarked the unterrified Seth. Luckily, Aunty’s deaf ear was turned his way.

Uncle Joel had once observed that Aunty was so devoted to Cyrus because he neither tramped in mud nor stayed out nights. But he had other sterling qualities. His was the gift of silence. And when you compared his behavior to that of Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, you realized his solid worth.

Zenobia was different. Like every macaw since the world began, she had an exaggerated idea of her beauty and of the

privileges that it bestowed upon her. Loudly she bewailed the fate that had cast her forth from the haven of the worsted-work cave. She shrieked, she squawked, she nipped. She scolded the little boys, she snarled at Father like the virago she was, and she set up a prompt feud with the old Captain.

Being very human the Captain took vast comfort in giving her sass for sass. With his voice dropped to a maddening whisper that it might not reach Aunty's ear, he hurled affronts at Zenobia that made her squall for fury. Jezebel, he called her, right to her outraged face. At sight of him she went into a frenzy, she beat her wings and she clashed her beak.

"I wonder if the Captain ever gave her a little smack," said Mercy to Adoniram.

"No, Sister, but the day we started she called him names, and he told her she wasn't no lady. And she's never forgotten it. I'm skairt of Zenobia myself. Captain says she's Mrs. Apollyon, all diked out in feathers."

"Of all the ridiculous——"

"Taint ridiculous. Not one bit. Captain says, all macaws are in league with Satan." Adoniram lifted solemn eyes. "Lucifer is their schoolmaster. 'Stead of prayin', they scoff. 'Stead of gospel hymns, he teaches 'em to holler blasphemy. They even wear his colors. Flame color on their throats, says Captain, and blister-scarlet on their tails, and sulphur on their weskits."

"Never mind. Let Mrs. Apollyon alone and she won't pester you. Now let's go drive for Captain, so he can lie down in the wagon awhile and rest."

Adoniram needed no urging. Being the eldest of the obstreperous three might have its sorrows, but it had one royal prerogative. Neither Seth nor Thomas was ever trusted with the reins. Alone Adoniram rode on the high

seat, the heavy leathers clutched in his freckled paws, prouder than Phaëthon.

The wagon, so shrewdly packed, held a fascination of its own. Father had loaned all the family portraits, except those of Grandfather and Grandmother, to the little Green River Museum. He had given away scores of books, and had shipped scores west to the new home. Then, by wise planning, he had crammed in everything that they would use on the journey. Not just the things that spelled absolute need, but things for comfort, too.

As a result the wagon itself looked like a traveling museum. Prosaic necessities elbowed pitiful uprooted treasures. Ax and water-bucket, bread-board and rolling-pin, Aunty's feather-bed, the canvas hammocks, a huge skillet, two leather-bound pack-baskets. Father's shot-gun, an old but efficient horse-pistol, Seth's hapless pocket-rifle, Thomas's bow and arrows. And cheek by jowl with these stern matters were the haughty old portraits, the fine and costly furniture, the faded velvet curtains, relics of a day whose splendor was long since past and gone.

Promptly Grandfather's portrait slipped its moorings of patchwork quilt. His wall-eye glared out as if he called down the vengeance of Heaven upon his impious descendants who had snatched him from the safe south wall where he had hung so many years. Grandmother had shifted her blanket drapery, too. You saw nothing of her, except her chin, to be sure. But that chin was eloquent.

The furniture was even more eloquent in its aspect of helpless protest. At the rear were Aunty's parlor chairs, beautiful old rosewood and marquetry, with cunningly woven rush seats. They stood bunched together, with the seats stuck out backward. They wore an air of frightened humiliation, as if they had just been turned up to be spanked, said little Thomas, with reminiscent sympathy.

Aunty's pineapple bed leaned fainting against the side of the wagon, its four fat pineapples clutching up like imploring hands. Opposite stood her Chippendale table, a piece fit for a Signer's drawing-room, now set against a background of lard pails, frying-pan, storm boots, and iron lantern. Everything that could be hung from walls or roof was thus suspended, including Zenobia's cage, still wearing its bead overskirt. Directly above it hung Cyrus's kettle. Occasionally a heavy jolt would splash water from Cyrus's traveling tub down on Zenobia, and the protest that ensued would rend the firmament on high. Luckily, Cyrus himself never spilled. Had he done so, Zenobia would have gobbled him without compunction.

Ponderous gray Mouser, who had ruled Aunty's kitchen for sixteen years, rode safely if obscurely beneath the carriage seat. Mouser was just two months older than Mercy. "Mercy's twin," as the little boys called her, had viewed Mercy with supercilious eye, ever since their earliest youth. No Chinese cat, carved in pallid jade above a Chinese lintel, could win over Mouser's poise. Even the indignity of a gunny-sack had not shaken her royal calm. But occasionally the humiliation of her lowly place proved beyond enduring. At such times, a surprised yelp from one of the little boys told that Mouser had avenged herself on a handy fat leg.

Even the under side of the wagon carried its burden, and a precious one. There hung long slim branches, saplings and seedlings and cherished cuttings, the cream of their deep old gardens. Aunty's quince seedlings, the Duchesse d'Angoulême pears that were Father's pride, the snow apples, the knotted ropes of Concord grapes, the raspberry canes, the apricots and plums and peaches. Then, wrapped even more tenderly in their burlap cradles, the lovely trees of spring. Lilac, syringa and smoke trees with their April promise of coppery lace. Moss-roses, sweet as old valentines; spirea, brought from Old Ipswich a hundred years

ago, where it had spread its pearly wreaths for a hundred years before; damask roses, forlorn and skinny little stalks to-day, but promising banks of ivory and crimson loveliness for Mays to come. There were canvas sacks, too, that gave out pungent odors. Seth sniffed at them resentfully. Camomile, sage, peppermint. Though you fled to the uttermost parts of the earth you'd never escape Aunty's yarb tea.

Each day brought its fill of marvels. They ate of venison—not the commonplace sort, bought from the Green River butcher's cart, but cut before their ravished eyes, from the flank, still warm, of a deer that Father himself had shot. They stood on the blood-stained ground, the very sod, maybe, of the Mohawk Massacre. True, that massacre had taken place when Father was a few years younger than Thomas, but the thrill of it still lived. You looked back of you cautiously; little icy shivers trickled down your spine. No telling: at any minute the thick hemlock branches might give way to a swarming rush of tall feathered shapes, your ears might ring to the deafening surge of war-whoops. Ecstasy! Ecstasy! Never again such wonder-joys as these. For such glory cannot shine for you nor for me. Never again. Not after we're nine years old, going on ten.

Yet all the youngsters' rambunctious happiness was a glory thin and faint when set against the look on the old Captain's face. For he had been thrown aside, cast away. Now he stood, snatched back to helpfulness, usefulness, authority. He had been old. But now he was young.

Out of all the travelers only Mercy knew regret. For the most part she was still such a child that she was carried away by this miraculous new world around her; but when she did remember, she was all one ache of self-reproach. Never before had she kept an hour's secret from Father. The blue ribbon tied beneath her ruffled tucker, and carrying Lemuel's carnelian ring which had cost a dollar-fifty at the postoffice store, was a millstone around her neck.

Aunty was really the pride of that long journey. Carefully Father had planned for her comfort, in so far as comfort might be possible. To go as far as they could by railroad would have been much easier for her, of course. But Aunty had refused to discuss that. Plenty of women-folks as old as she, and older, had traveled by covered wagon in the years gone by. Plenty were still journeying thus, and none the worse for it. Women-folks a sight better than she was, any day. And here she went, rolling in state in the big carryall, with its deep springs, its cushions packed close around her, fine as any queen. More, there came with her her own beloved feather-bed, hung on a broad sailcloth hammock, so she could rest at night as peacefully as in her own cozy room! A pretty figure she'd cut if she dared breathe one word of complaint! Besides, hadn't she seen pictures of railroad trains that had run off the track, and tossed their passengers head-first into rivers and slammed them against houses, and, far worse, spitted them on a curling rail that had pierced through the coach floor and stood them thus aloft, holding them as if ready for broiling, like so many partridges? No such heathenish devices for Aunty.

Besides, as she confided privately to Mercy, no real lady would ever take the chance of dying in public. "Think of it, Mercy Rose! How would you feel being brought face to face with eternity, and you in your chimmy like as not, and maybe not even your hoops on! You'd never get over it. Never in this world."

So, having set her course, Aunty followed it with not one whimper. An aching old martyr but a courageous old martyr, mind that.

Although they had planned to stop at taverns over night, the dry warm weather made it possible for them to camp instead. Aunty and Mercy slept on the great feather-bed in the wagon, and Father and the Captain swung up a sail-

cloth hammock apiece, for there were always obliging neighborly trees to tie to. The little boys curled up like so many puppies on a fat straw tick beside the camp fire. This, one need not add, spelled the crowning rapture.

To their deep disgust, their caravan need set up no protection against bears and Indians. However, they encamped in the old pioneer way. A great fire was built, for the autumn nights were cool. The wagons were ranged close by, and the horses were picketed some distance off. First, everybody set to gathering sticks and brush for the fire. Then, when it had burned down to coals, the roasting ears and the potatoes were tucked into the hot ashes, the big three-footed skillets of squirrels and fish were set on the coals, and the coffee was put to boil. After that luscious supper, how good the warm rest by the fire, while the stars stood guard behind the swaying branches, and a round red October moon glowed like a lantern in the deep night of the sky!

Through the mellow golden days they journeyed on. By Indian trails they went as through a sorcerer's highway, roofed by green drooping branches, walled with the blood-red tapestry of November oak-trees, carpeted by rustling many-colored leaves. Pure pale gold, as softly gold as Miss Evelina's ringlets; apricot and cherry and clear translucent crimson; crimson of burning-bush, crimson of sumac, carved fiery orange of bittersweet. Sculptured cornices of ivy, now tipped with fire, now darkly, bravely green. On, down the great valley, bound by its mountains folded in their eternal blue. On, on.

Always the little boys watched eager-eyed, their hearts pounding in the fearful hope of Indians. Indians in plenty they saw. Slouchy cropheaded men; squat wrinkled women, carrying their nests of baskets for sale; grim stolid children. Always their ears were alert to catch the crackle of moccasined feet on the dry brush, the campfire flames in

a deep hidden glade, the singing sting of arrows, the shrill bloodcurdling wail of the warwhoop.

"I guess the truly Indians have gone on a visit," sighed little Thomas. But on that very night, his wildest hope came true. For in dark and gloom and single file, down the trail towards them swung a line of Iroquois braves, in full war-paint. Lean tall bodies, fierce painted faces, proud high-flung eagle-feathers: phantom-dim against the cold yellow sunset they strode by. Away they glimmered, far into the dusk. Wraiths of past splendor, shadows of a glory forgotten, they vanished, painted for one breath against the fading November sky.

"Oh, oh!" Thomas shuddered with joyful awe. "Oh, if they'd only have a battle, so's we could stop and see!"

"I'd hardly call that a warrior band," said Father dryly. Father's eye had caught their threadbare blankets, their torn and ragged moccasins, their broken eagle feathers. Pitiful vaunting tag-ends of their once mighty tribe, they had swaggered past, they had flaunted their way down their last dark road, the road to night.

But Thomas would have known an even deeper thrill, had he realized that, throughout the next two nights, Father had sat close to the wagon, his rifle across his knees, his eyes alert at every crackle in the brush, peering sharp at every shadow. But not in dread of those forlorn enemies, but because this was a lonely stretch of the road. And strange and cruel things had happened there.

Now there opened yet one more gate of magic. For soon they boarded a packet out of Albany for Buffalo, by way of the Erie Canal. Not one element of that voyage escaped the youngsters' eyes. The long narrow boat itself was fitted so snugly into the slim strip of water that the two might have formed a Titan plaything. The drivers, some of them mere boys, who bawled and swaggered and cursed, with an eager eye out for the shocked admiration of the three

little brothers. The regal captain in his high boots and his curly-brim beaver, with his reverential bows to Aunty, and his beaming strut whenever Mercy came into view; a gallantry which Mercy gazed upon, oblivious, although a bit flattered inwardly. For how should a woman betrothed, even though but halfway betrothed, stoop to glance upon an alien worshiper?

The canal itself unfolded wonder upon wonder. There was Montezuma Marsh, where folks came by scores, so Aunty told them, to buy flags for rush chair-seats. All six of Aunty's superb old mahogany chairs had soft lustrous seats of rushes, her pride, alas, too soon to be her grief. All their own chairs of rosewood, inlaid with mother of pearl, part of their young mother's dowry, had rush seats, too. So that the great marsh held a friendly feeling of home. Even now, in late autumn, it held a wild and desolate beauty. All around, as far as eye could see, stretched the vivid green of the lowlands, a living emerald against the masses of dry rustling reeds and the great brown papery plaques of the water-lily pads. All through those dun reed forests sounded the whirr and ripple of birds, arriving, departing, themselves so many hurrying pioneers. The lonely cry of the wild geese, the plaintive call of the quail, the sigh and tremor of uncounted wings. For, as in the dry dead reeds there lay the green jewel of the deathless marsh-grass, so amid the lone cold marsh itself there awoke and shone these jewels of eager life.

Then came the famous hill of Palmyra, "The hill of Cumorah," where the golden plates of Moroni were buried; and after that, the bewildering lock at Fairport. "How on earth could the canal climb so high?" inquired the puzzled Seth. At Palmyra, Thomas hopefully desired to be put off, armed with the fire-shovel, that he himself might dig up Aladdin's treasure. He was dissuaded from this glorious

aim with much difficulty. But soon he had dried his tears, absorbed by the endless panorama of the passengers.

And such passengers! So many folks, and all so different from the staid and righteous citizenry of Green River! The vast stream of 1854 was yet to come. But a river of emigration was pouring down the narrow channel of the canal. Stream on stream it came, whole families, whole neighborhoods, whole townships, on their way to the newer countries, to Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas.

And such people! The women held no vital interest. As the Captain observed, with the sapience of eighty-odd, wimmen folks is wimmen folks, the world over. Rip 'em up by the roots, and start 'em traveling, and they're so many scairt lost cats. Tired, harried, hopeful, despondent, they carried their heavy, squirming, squalling babies, and tagged after their men. The very cores of their homes, the leaven of life they might be, yet worn to listlessness, dazed, spent, they seemed no more than the autumn leaves that blew along the shores.

But the men! Back on their rocky little farms, toiling in dull villages, they too might have been listless and depressed. But now, swept out of their narrow ruts by this mighty torrent, this sweep of motion, this change on change was as new blood in their veins. Adventurers, explorers, pioneers by rooted instinct, they thrust on. They were as men coming into their birthright, coming in confidence, in unquestioning hope. Their shoulders lifted, their strides grew proud, they seemed to swell and grow tall. And clutching their household goods, dragging their children, their women tagged at their cocksure heels.

Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor—they were all there, just as on Mercy's outgrown button-string. Roaring lumbermen, down from the northern forests. Sturdy, red-faced drovers, west-bound to take up wider pastures; spruce young officers ordered to distant forts, puffed up with a little brief author-

ity. Land agents, a swarm of them. Some of them were men of probity. But a sad majority were as thorough-paced scoundrels as ever dodged a rope.

One of these dubious gentlemen, a youngish man named Norris, made of himself a special irritation to Father throughout the six days' journey. He badgered him constantly with glittering offers, until Father longed to take him by the scruff of his impudent neck, and chuck him into the canal. "Only," as he complained to Mercy, "that sort would swim out before he struck the water."

Finally, under repeated snubs, Norris subsided. But he was a brazen sort, and no snub could silence him for long.

Through the blue-and-gold days, the big boat moved to a quaint mingled measure. The ring of the captain's voice, the tired crooning of the mothers to their broods, the crack of the drivers' whips, made a constant rhythm. But when twilight came, and the huge whaleoil lamps were lighted in the cabin, the boat rocked and swayed with song. A mid-century traveler once set it down as a fact that these later pioneers did not merely travel west, they argued and wrangled every inch of their way west. But in their more mellow hours, they sang and played their way west, no doubt of that. They brought out their flutes and violins, and also their dulcimers, their accordions and their mouth-organs. There was hardly a soul aboard but could carry a tune. Or at least, there was hardly a soul who did not possess a touching confidence in his talents for melody. Night after night, the old songs resounded over lonely black marshes, through dim forest trails. *The Juniper Tree; Oh, Susannah; The Jay Bird's Altar; Jim Along, Jim Along, Josie; Far Beyond the Northern Sea*—the very stars must dance to these rollicking old airs.

Soon one voice would lift a graver note. Then the whole cabinful would join in a noble old hymn. Following the hymn, some ardent nature would be moved to rise up and

address the passengers. Sometimes three or four earnest speakers would be on their feet at once. The topics of their discourse varied, from the end of the world—which was scheduled by a large element for the following April—to personal opinions concerning various public servants, from the President on down. Very personal opinions, these were, and the evening would reach a speedy climax when several indignant champions would spring up to defend their favorites. However, the captain kept an eagle eye on events. Just as the evening reached the boiling point, he would stride to the front, seize on a flushed vituperative orator, and propel him rapidly to the narrow deck. There, in the cooling starlight, he would urge the disputant to cool off and be quick about it, or else take to the tow-path. Invariably this method worked like magic. That is, until the boat reached the landing at Lockport.

At Lockport, Freedom's Band came aboard, en route for Buffalo.

At first glance, Freedom's Band looked appealingly innocent. It was a quartette; two apple-cheeked young soprano sisters, two husky young basso brothers. They were traveling through the Middle West, giving concerts in every settlement, in every schoolhouse, even. Between them they lugged two violins, a flute, a clarinet, a French horn, and a small but efficient drum. Every one of them could double in brass at the slightest provocation. Every one of them could sing as sings the lark at Heaven's gate. But their vocal programs were made up of anti-slavery songs of a violence that would rouse wild enthusiasm and even wilder fury in any partisan audience. So that they were quite as safe an addition to this emotional passenger list as so many lively young charges of dynamite.

They devoted their first evening aboard to instrumental music. This was a fortunate choice. Even the captain relaxed his vigilance, and sat happily keeping time with a

large varnished boot to the *March of Chapultepec*, and *My Ladylove Polka*. On the second evening, the passengers crowded eagerly into the forward cabin, all agog for the new program.

The four sturdy young folks stepped upon the dais and scraped and curtsied charmingly. The two girls, engaging young creatures in flounced pink satin crinolines, their yellow hair piled into massive birds' nests, their round faces beaming, stepped forward and lifted up their voices. Through the packed little room rang their deafening young entreaty:

*"We'll strike the fetters from the slave.
We'll blot this shame from our fair land——"*

Then like the crash of thunder, the two powerful brothers came storming in——

"Do you belong to Freedom's Band!"

The splendid voices rang in a tremendous challenge. Over the staring upturned faces, there blazed an answering flame.

A moment of dead silence. Then a score of passengers leaped to their feet.

"Hooray!" "Glory Hallelujah!" "Throw them into the canal, the —— nigger-stealers!" "Take your hands off them wimmen-folks, or I'll——"

One minute ago the room had been a decorous assemblage of crinolines and frock coats. Now it was a frantic, seething mob.

Father scooped up the little boys and crammed them into the nearest berth. He seized on Mercy and thrust her behind him.

The captain caught Father's eye.

"Grab 'em!" he shouted. He made a clutch for three overwrought gentlemen who had seized on the two burly

brothers and were dragging them off the dais. The pink-satin sisters were shrieking at the top of their strong lungs, and trying to haul their brothers back. "Be quick, will you?"

Father was quick. He caught two vociferous partisans by their rearing velvet collars, jerked open the big double doors and shoved them outside. The captain followed, hustling three more. With unbelievable speed, he pushed all five over the edge of the deck.

They landed waist-deep in the cold canal water, spluttering, heaving, squawking. The captain whirled back and faced the mob.

"Any more of you want to swim to Buffalo?" he bawled at the astounded crowd.

The hullabaloo stopped as if the mob had been stricken dumb. There fell a dazed silence.

Then, like a scene in some preposterous play, over the deck-edge scrambled two drenched and sodden figures. Pop-eyed and clawing, they floundered on board. Their long locks and their whiskers dripped with water.

From the crowded room there rose a shout that might have split the packet roof. A shout of wild Homeric laughter.

One minute ago, the mob had grazed black tragedy. But all that wild mob fury fell away, snuffed out by even wilder mirth.

Over the deck crawled another drenched, snorting object, another, another. Across the narrow deck they clumped, dripping. Red-faced and sheepish, they scuttled through the forward saloon to the calico-draped recesses of the women's cabin. The howls of laughter followed them, a mounting wave. And with that laughter, the whole crowd grew magically serene.

"Nothing like a good laugh, to pacify folks." The captain turned to Father, with a grin of relief.

"If only they stay pacified." Father grinned back at him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“**A** THIRD of our journey past, yet we all survive. Blessed be monotony!”

Father stood on the dock at Buffalo in the midst of the swirling crowd. Out of that tangle one figure stood out sharp and clear. No wonder. This apparition was an elderly man, tall, solid, bronzed to saddle-color. But it was not his face, it was his clothing that caught the eye and held it spell-bound between amazement and wild, unseemly mirth. He wore a single garment of checked blue cotton, of the identical material used for Thomas’s infant pinafores, but it was not a pinafore in cut. A chiton, rather. It hung straight from his wide shoulders in alarmingly classic lines, fastened none too securely by a black shawl pin. His muscular arms were uncovered, and his strong lean legs were as bare as a Highlander’s; his massive feet were thrust into sandals the size of small scows. Over his chest flowed his uncut beard, a grizzled flood that reached his waist. His large round guileless face was rosy with soap and water, his blue frock was spotless and starched till it swung out from his bony calves like a giant lamp-shade. His beard looked scoured and starched too. The equipment he carried suggested a Roman soldier in light marching order. A small dishpan hung over his chest, like a diminutive shield. A skillet, a hair-brush, and several artless toilet articles were tied to its handle. Small sacks of potatoes and onions, meal and salt, were lashed to his back. He caught Father’s eye and beamed.

“I am the Apostle of the Clean Hand,” he introduced himself. “Cleanliness is the cornerstone of my faith. I eat

no food, save that which I myself prepare. I use no dish nor linen that I myself have not cleansed. I use no buttons, you see, for they are a temptation to vanity. I have never cut my beard," he caressed the amazing ornament with a blandly gratified hand, "for I mar not the image of God, which I myself am. I am an Owenite, a Fourierite, a Vegetarian, a Grahamite. Also, I am a phrenologist and an astrologer, with some leanings to Spiritualism. And above all things, I am an Abolitionist."

Mr. Stafford gulped.

"But to-day I am minded to put aside my raiment of peace and take on the armor of wrath. Among these incoming passengers there is a land agent, one Norris by name, who has done me great wrong. By trickery he brought me to accept a deed to land in Indiana which he avowed to be a very Garden of Eden, but which I find to be but marsh and swamp, with not one rood of good plow soil. No man of law will take my case. So I have come to meet him here and counsel with him upon the error of his ways."

Mr. Stafford looked pityingly at this guileless elderly child. If no lawyer would take his case he could counsel till the cows came home, for all the good it would do him.

"He is expected on this packet. So I have walked many weary miles—— Ah, sir, there he comes now!"

Head high, his ferret face rosy, his diamonds glittering, Norris strode from the cabin.

"Wonder what he'll say to the scamp!"

Amused and pitying, Father stepped forward. But only a step. For in the twink of an eye, the Apostle had forgotten all the mild persuasion that lay upon his tongue. With a bellow anything but apostolic, he flung himself across the deck and landed on Norris with a thud.

Norris fell back against the cabin wall.

Those were the good old times when men fought at the

drop of a hat, or without it. Among the milling crowd were several men who held bitter grudges against Norris. Others of his own cloth rushed to his rescue. A large faction, who knew nothing of what this fracas might be about, but who loved a fight for the fight's sake, hurled themselves gladly into the mêlée. In three seconds the whole dock was a magnificent free-for-all. Everybody came gleefully in. Sailors, laborers, canal-drivers, passengers; even the high and mighty young army men and the lordly judge in his fine furred coat threw all dignity to the winds, and sailed in, heart and soul, fists and feet.

Nobody protested. Nobody sent in a riot call. In those happy days, there were no such things as riot calls. Besides, to interfere would mean a grave infraction of vested rights.

Alone of all the crowd, Mr. Stafford was not yearning for a fist-fight. He thrust his way, bruised and furious, out of the mob. But as he struggled free, there rose a whoop. The Apostle had slammed Norris back against the cabin again, and was flailing him right and left with both large, clean, powerful hands. Given two minutes more he would have polished off the job to a T. But Norris's friends, with regrettable loyalty, rushed him from the rear. The Apostle turned to beat back his assailants. Instantly Norris leaped on his shoulders and hurled him backward. He pitched down, crashed on the stone dock, and rolled over, limp. The gang closed in on him like wolves.

Mr. Stafford shot into the crowd. He grabbed the fallen Apostle and dragged him inside the warehouse door. Half a dozen partisans then jumped on Norris and his crew. One enthusiast wielded a crowbar with notable results, another did execution with a bung-starter. Norris, realizing that the fight was turning against him, vanished like quicksilver.

The crowd, refreshed and rambunctious, indulged in a

few more yells and a scuffle or so, then melted amiably away. There remained only the bruised and dusty Apostle, the packet captain, who, now that the storm was over, had ventured from his own cabin, and was making stern official inquiries, and Mr. Stafford, one sleeve torn out of his Sabbath coat and his stock rearing furiously under one ear.

"So this is what you call brotherly counsel, eh?" He braced the Apostle's head against his knee, and splashed him, not too tenderly, with a bucket of water.

The Apostle revived, looked up with a sheepish grin.

"I will own that my sinful mortality was too much for me. But my evil nature has won for me some gain."

"It's won you a black eye and some ugly bruises."

"You fail to understand. In my dealings with this land shark, I observed that he carried his riches in a wallet, instead of wearing a gold belt, as do sensible men. So, when I first grappled with him, I tore out the wallet and hurled it from me as far as I could. In that turmoil, I felt sure that no one would notice my act. So I presume the wallet is still where it fell. It landed, I believe, in yon bunch of weeds."

Again Mr. Stafford gulped. Groggy but serene, the Apostle floundered to his feet, stumbled across the wharf, and dived into the dusty clump. He returned, still groggy, but still serene. He opened the wallet and rummaged through it. It held a fat roll of bills, and a bundle of legal papers. From these he fished out the note that he had given on his worthless place.

"Just as I supposed. This is well worth a black eye, my friend. It rescues me from the misery of bondage. Moreover, I shall take a few of these bills, to pay for my journey, as well as to recompense me for the money already so unjustly paid."

Mr. Stafford got his breath with an effort.

"You mean you'll take his wallet? Why, man, Norris will have a posse out for you in two shakes."

"I think not. I shall return to him by mail all the contents of the wallet, except what is rightly my own. Then it is borne in upon me that I shall be wise to leave the city at once. In a private conveyance. I trust, sir, that you will give me a seat in your wagon as far as you go?"

Father opened his mouth to speak. Then he shut it again.

He went in search of Aunty. Aunty received him with infuriating calm.

"Fixin' to adopt another orphan?"

"I have no choice about it. If we abandon the Apostle here, there's no telling what Norris will do to him. At least we can squeeze up and carry him as far as the Indiana border."

"Well." Aunty's eye was as cold as Cyrus's own. "S'pose we can stand him if we got to. But stop at the very next settlement and buy some jeans and I'll cobble him up a pair of breeches. I won't have him careerin' around with nothing on but a check gingham apron."

Father broached the topic of pants. But the Apostle vetoed them with emphasis.

"Pants are a delusion and a snare. They are food for vanity."

"But they are an established custom——"

"There lies your Bible, sir. It has many sacred pictures. I have seen them. Do you find the patriarchs and the prophets wearing pants? Never."

Aunty sighed.

"S'pose we got to stand it. Hope we don't meet up with many travelers, that's all I got to say. You have to take him along, though, seeing that he's a brother Abolitionist."

Father bit off a brief but poignant word. Aunty didn't mean to be so enraging. But it would be some comfort, if

just one of his placid Laodicean household could understand.

He glanced at Mercy. She was looking away up the white road to the east. Her eyes were dark stars. What was it she gazed at? Was it the face of Lemuel G. Crowther? Did she catch a whiff of bergamot?

The Apostle made himself willingly at home. Quite too much at home. His was the gift of tongues, and he used it in season and out of season. High on the driver's seat, the old Captain scowled and growled about folks that got themselves up in women's duds, but thought they was so gosh-dingit smart that they could hand out advice to a man who had driven horses before they'd cut their teeth. Back in the carryall Aunty smoldered and thought up cutting retorts to his generous criticism of her cooking, which wasn't such poor eating as might be, but which was badly planned and not too clean,—this to Aunty!—and of a wastefulness which would bring her to the poorhouse, long before her day was spent. His cup ran over, full measure, with unasked advice and well-meant rebuke. He even poured it over Mercy when they stopped for Sunday at a village, and she put on her best blue delaine and her Chantilly shawl.

“Sinful folly, these gauds. Sinful folly——”

He rose at gray dawn, before even the little boys awoke, and sang hymns in a voice that jarred the monarchs of the forest around him. He was as vinegar to the eyes; as sand-paper to the spirit. He was cleanly of body, he was honest and industrious, he was cheerful and helpful and righteous in all things. And your one earthly desire was to tie him up in his blue gingham apron and cast him into the depths of the sea.

At length, a pitying Providence took a hand. At a cross-road they met another caravan. This caravan was taking a

road that would bring it within sixty miles of the Apostle's village. Promptly the Apostle invited himself to join them. In fact, he had given both invitation and acceptance before the leader could catch his astonished breath. Fondly the Apostle bade them all good-by, warned Aunty against the evils of vanity—"Turn from the errors of your ways, my sister, else those feathers in your bonnet will scorch over hell-fire"—adjured Father that he need expect nothing but evil in this world if he did not stop eating bacon for breakfast; warned the Captain that no tobacco-chewer could inherit the Kingdom of Heaven; and promised to come to the Sangamon country soon and make them a good long visit.

As the caravan departed, Aunty looked at Father. Father grinned sheepishly back.

"Don't feel so cheap, John. No doubt but he was an instrument appointed to us for chastening. And I got used to that heathen rig, 'specially after it turned so chilly, he had to wrap up in my Paisley shawl."

"We'll have easy sailing now," vowed the Captain, and flourished a sardonic plug towards the departing Adviser.

Vain hope. Their blue and gold Indian summer vanished under driving squalls of rain. They took refuge in a filthy tavern, where Aunty slept sitting up in one chair with her feet on another; a haunted sleep. Three times a day they were fed bitter boiled coffee and greasy salt pork and huge slab-sided biscuit streaked green with saleratus.

After the first meal Mercy went in search of the landlady. She was a stout and slapdash female who sat by the fire and chewed spruce gum and shuddered comfortably over a blood-and-thunder novel. Mercy asked permission to bring in their own provisions and cook for the family herself. The slovenly landlady made no objection. But Aunty

said no. "Think I could swallow even our own vittles if they were once carried through that kitchen?" She shuddered at the thought.

They set off as soon as the storm was over. But now all the demons that beset the traveler swooped down. Indian summer yielded to a week of squaw winter. It grew colder and colder. A silvery rime touched the water-pails at day-break. Ribbons of frost lay in the rutted road. Father and the old Captain shivered in their canvas hammocks, and Mercy insisted on taking the little boys into the covered wagon at night.

After that their nights were Bedlam, for Thomas kicked and flounced, and Adoniram talked in his sleep, thus rousing Zenobia to injured squawks; and Seth, even in his slumbers, could conjure up devastation. Twice he rolled over and upset the dim-lit lantern, which hung at the rear of the wagon. The second time it exploded, and if Father had not leaped up and smothered the flame with his blanket, wagon and family and all would have gone up in smoke.

Not thirty miles from the tavern, Button went lame. They crawled at a snail's pace for days. Their frequent halts gave the little boys ample time to scout around and explore the woods near by. Of course Thomas promptly got lost, and half a day of agonizing search went by, before Father came upon his youngest, stuck to his arm-pits in a swamp, and weeping like a fountain.

"Quicksands. Thank Heaven they weren't deep enough to smother him." Father dropped down, pale as ashes.

By the time Mercy had scraped the mire off Thomas and stripped him and boiled him until he looked like a repentant little lobster, and plastered him with camphor and mutton tallow against the croup, it was not worth while to set off till morning. And by morning Thomas and his brothers were fresh and energetic again and ready for high emprise.

Seth, racing ahead, saw a small grayish mound under a tangle of wild grape vines. From immemorial instinct, he let fly a rock. Promptly the gray mound exploded. Exploded into a humming cloud of yellow-jackets. Seth departed with alacrity. Unluckily the Captain, directly behind him, was leading Button and Betsy down to the creek. The first yellow-jacket got in a quick jab at Button. Button forgot his lame leg. He plunged, reared, knocked the old man flat, and went careering through the trammeling vines like Pegasus turned loose. Betsy was not so fortunate. One heavy withe took a turn around her foreleg. As she charged ahead, the leg doubled under her. She went down headlong, kicking crazily. Father dashed to her rescue, only to be hurled back by a flying squadron of yellow-jackets. He fled back to Aunty and tore the Paisley shawl from her shoulders.

“John! Don’t you dare go back. They’ll sting your eyes out!”

“Father, they’ll kill Betsy!—Oh, oh——!”

“Confound the yellow-jackets!—Confound Betsy! It’s the Captain! He’s trapped in those vines, he’s sprawled right against the nest! They’ll sting him to death.”

Half blinded by the shawl, Father rushed stumbling back. The Captain, still struggling in the vines, raised a warning shout:

“Hey, Stafford! Let me alone! Keep out! Get away, ye donnerd fool!”

“What in the nation——”

“I’m bee-proof, I tell ye. Been stung from head to foot, a thousand times over. But they can’t pizen me. Never did. Never will.”

A cloud of yellow-jackets buzzed around him, darting at his face, crawling over his hands. He tore the withes free, stood up, and brushed the angry swarm away like so

many midges. "Here, gimme that shawl, I'll flap 'em away from your head while you haul Betsy to her feet."

"Betsy's leg is broken. I know it. The kindest thing I can do is to shoot her."

"Fiddlesticks. Get her up, I tell you. Here! Hey!"

He flapped and he flourished. Father, batting his eyes frantically against malicious stings, slashed away the vines, and jerked Betsy to her feet. Mad with pain, she tore down the trail, Father clinging to her head. She ran half a mile before Father could drag her to a stop. When she slowed down at last she was wild-eyed and foaming. Her velvet nostrils were cruelly stung, her shoulders dappled with lumps.

"We'll tie her up to a sapling and slap on mud," the Captain said, taking command. "You boys fill up the pails, then keep a'sloshin'. If we can hold her quiet till it dries, she'll be fit as a fiddle."

"Mud poultices on a horse!"

"If you don't put 'em on, you'll have a dead horse by morning. She's got enough pizen aboard her to sink a ship."

Everybody set to work. Everybody kept a'sloshin' and a'sloshin'. Poor Betsy was a wise creature. Instantly aware of that healing coolness, she stood like a lamb. Many hands made light work, but somewhat reckless work. Everybody got sloshed as well as Betsy. At last, Betsy stood clay from mane to hoofs, looking like the model for an equestrian statue.

"You'll have to shear that mane off. The mud will never wash out. Looky here, while we're at it, we better plaster you up, too. You got a pair of black eyes ahead of you, certain sure."

Aunty had already poured camphor on Father's stings. But he submitted to a thick layer of clay as meekly as

Betsy herself. He ate his supper with some difficulty, for his lips swelled to his cheek-bones.

“Better stop off a day,” advised the Captain. “Betsy is considerable bunged up, and Button has managed to jam his shoulder again. And it won’t hurt you to get some extra sleep.”

Father seized the opportunity. He slept like a log through the morning. But at noon he was awakened by a deafening uproar. He tumbled out of his blankets to see his family go pelting down the slope to the creek, like figures on a demented frieze. The Captain galloped ahead. He ran so fast that his blue coattails stood out straight in the breeze.

“What in the mischief——” Father grabbed for his boots and joined the chase.

The Captain reached the creek edge, stooped: there rose a wail of utter anguish. Aunty’s voice.

“Oh! Oh, Captain, what *have* you done! Oh, I told you he was dying, to put him in the water, quick. But I meant, into the *bucket*, not the *creek*! Now he’ll swim away, and I’ll never, never see him again!”

“Who’s dying? What in pity’s name——”

Then it all dawned on Father. He sat down feebly on the nearest stump. When he rose up, he was weak and spent, but he had conquered the godless mirth that almost overwhelmed him. His features composed to decent sympathy, he hastened to the creek.

Aunty turned, her poor face wet with tears.

“It was all Seth’s doing——”

“But, Aunty, I didn’t mean to——”

“Didn’t mean to, lived in a lean-to! I’d brought Cyrus’s kettle out to give him some fresh water. Seth and Adoniram were scuffling, and between ‘em they tipped over the kettle, Cyrus and all. I hear a yell from Adoniram, and there lies

Cyrus, flat on his back, and just breathing his last. The Captain was right by, and when I screamed, he grabs up Cyrus, and doesn't he think I meant, Put him in *the creek!* And the harder I tore after him, the faster he ran——”

“Well, what's a man to do?” The Captain shuffled miserably. “You come rarin' after me, screechin' blue blazes, and that durn fish just givin' his last flop on earth. So I thinks you want me to hurry. And I hurried.”

It was all clear enough. The Captain's one thought had been to rush the gasping Cyrus to his native element, not to give him the freedom of the seas. But Cyrus was charmed by this venture into the real world. He swam in full view, gayly exploring the shallow creek. When poor Aunty called him fondly and stooped to grasp him, he flirted an impudent fin at her, and flickered away. She knelt on the miry bank, she begged, she entreated. Cyrus slid away under a giant root, and meditated.

“We can scoop him up in the bucket, Aunty. Lemme try.”

Scooped up in the bucket of captivity? Not for Cyrus. At last Mercy suggested a butterfly net.

Butterfly nets not being included in their camping outfit, father ripped a hoop off their cask of china, and Mercy sewed her sheerest petticoat thereon. This ruse succeeded. Surprised and annoyed, Cyrus found himself outgeneraled. For days he sulked, to Aunty's distress. But soon he was his old supercilious self.

Again the weather cleared. Away flew squaw winter. Back came Indian summer, softer, milder, lovelier than before. Day followed day, so luminous, so shining blue, that it seemed as if for their sakes the year had swung from November back to June.

Late on the third sweet tranquil night, Mercy awoke.

She twitched back a corner of canvas and peeped out.

It was close on midnight. Some yards from the wagon lay the campfire, a heap of glowing coals. In his hammock the Captain slept, peacefully, rhythmically. But Father was not asleep. Rolled in his blanket, he sat on a log near the fire. The firelight shone rosy silver on his silver head. He sat staring into the coals.

Mercy groped for her woolly slippers. She pulled down Joseph's Coat and slid it on over her frilled and fluted nighty. Not even the wagon-step creaked as she slipped down into the dew-fleeced grass.

Father glanced up. He did not say anything. He pulled her down on his knee, tucked her feet up on the log beside him, and wrapped his blanket around them both. Mercy's head settled into the round of his broad shoulder. Her heavy braids bumped over his arm, ropes of bronze where the light struck them. She took a firm grip on Father's free hand, and tucked it tight under her chin.

A tired old moon was creeping down the west. One small star tagged after it, clutching its apron-strings of mist, exactly as little Thomas clutched forever at Aunty's apron-strings. High and far through the elms' black tracery Cassiopeia queened it on her jeweled throne. Late November; yet even in the dim moonlight there wavered on the blue far hills a faint blue mist—the last pale smoke of Indian camp-fires. No chill lay on that still fragrant air. And all the little hunting winds blew soft as spring.

After a while her father spoke.

“ ‘Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubim?’ ”

“No, sir. Thank goodness, they went to sleep early. All three. I can't think what's come over them. They've been too good to be true, all day.”

Father chuckled. Mercy's eyes lifted again to the vast illumined pageant of the sky.

Crossing the zenith went a mighty processional. Priests

in flowing, swirling white, acolytes waving pale censers that brimmed with dim and curling smoke, all molten gold, all drifting silver. Then in a breath that lofty ceremonial vanished. Now all the clouds were huge galleons, plunging full-sail across that dark, tempestuous blue. Ship on ship swept by, swept by. All the old splendid cruel names rang in her ears. Salamis, Gravelines, Trafalgar—you read about them in your history. But there they were just names, and bothersome to spell at that. Now they stormed on, all glorious before your eyes. Up the Channel came the Great Armada, racing on the heels of the royal flagship, whose mainmast pierced the stars. A sweep of canvas, a flare of ghostly cannon, a soundless, blinding whirl of spray as the last ship plunged beneath the black and bitter sea. O wonderful, O pitiful! All the mighty galliasses with their laboring chained galley-slaves, all the airy pinnaces, all the glittering banners, the crashing brazen ordnance. . . . Then, even as you caught your quivering breath, the wan- ing moon shone through. And all the white sails turned to whiter plumes, to trailing misty garments. Up the long hill of the sky they trod, pale princesses-royal, every one. The wan exquisite procession of the young wives, as they fol- lowed their lord's bier to the burning-ghat. On and on they went, trembling, faltering, fearless, serene. Proudly they laid their doomed loveliness beside their prince, their prince in life and in death. Still upon the ivory catafalque they lay, that high throne of sorrow, already lighted by the ghostly brands of moonlight. . . . She saw them all, so clear! They were robed like the Ladies of the Zenana, according to the artless imagination of the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, and they wore sheer pantalettes, and wide crinolines, and flowing undersleeves, and their glorious tresses were combed into waterfalls or else bound in netted chignons, and could their lord and king have but beheld

them he would undoubtedly have gasped for horror and risen straight up from his illustrious bier.

. . . Then, even as she sighed and trembled under the terror of her fantasy, all that sad beauty vanished as beneath a wand of magic. All that far majesty turned to mighty walls, upspringing turrets. High arches flung themselves across the sky. And through her mind wove the hushed enchanted words:

*“The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces
The solemn temples, the great globe itself——”*

She stopped. As if she had spoken aloud, her father's voice took up her thought——

“And, like this unsubstantial pageant faded——”

“Mercy Rose! Hark!”

Down through the forest came a rush of flying hoofs. Through the screen of willows burst a horseman, a tall boy, clinging weakly to his frenzied horse. Wild-eyed, snorting, the horse stopped at the very edge of the camp-fire. The boy tumbled off and stood clinging to the saddle. One arm hung lax and useless. Blood streamed from his fingers. His face was a mask of blood.

“I saw your camp-fire,” he gasped. “I'm driving up from Barclay's, with a load of refugees for the Under-ground. They're after me—the slave-grabbers—can you hide me?”

Then he pitched down in a limp sprawl at Father's feet.

CHAPTER NINE

“FATHER, is he killed?”

“Nonsense, no. But he’s lost a good deal of blood.” Father went down on his knees, tore back the boy’s sleeve, clamped his fingers on the welling cut. “Artery. I’ve got to put on a tourniquet, quick. Tear off a strip of Joseph’s Coat. Hurry.”

Mercy jerked and pulled, but the thick quilted stuff would not give way.

“Can’t you tear it? Here, take my jack-knife. Don’t you see the fellow is bleeding to death?”

The knife sawed through Aunt Euphemia’s follow-me-lad, slashed out a thick chunk of somber plush: Great-uncle Jonathan’s coffin lining.

“In heaven’s name, how can I make a tourniquet of that! Find something thin, that will sink in. Tear a piece off your night-gown. *Thin*, I tell you. A ribbon, if you’ve got one—”

Mercy’s hands went to her throat. She snatched off the narrow blue ribbon, and thrust it into Father’s hands. The little ring, still knotted in place, went too, but she did not even look at it.

Father grunted.

“That will have to do. Here, keep your fingers on that cut while I tie it.”

Stars, trees, campfire, joined in a mad dance. But she pressed the torn edges together, deftly, skillfully. Father rolled the plush into a wad, crammed it on, tied it tight. Another minute, and he had torn the lace-edged hem from her night-dress, and bandaged the boy’s head with it. His

fingers flashed over the limp huddle from head to foot.

"No bones broken. Only bullet scratches. Lucky for him. Aha, here's a chest wound. Only grazed, though."

He lifted the lax shoulders and laid the unconscious head in Mercy's lap. She looked down dizzily at the face on her knee. Between the wide bandage and the drench of blood, she could see very little of that face. She made out black, heavy brows, a square jaw, an insolent mouth.

"I'll set the coffee-pot on the fire. As soon as he can swallow, we will give him some. That will steady him up. Listen. Hear that?"

Again that muffled drumbeat: nearer, nearer, like swift, ominous thunder.

"Get into the wagon, quick! They must not see you. Pull the blankets over you. Child, you're *smeared*!"

"I suppose so." Mercy looked down at her blood-wet hands, her long frilled sleeves all splashed and dabbled, the sodden Joseph's Coat.

"Here, help me. We've got to hide him. Quick!"

Father snatched up the long slack body and shoved the boy head-first into the wagon alongside of Aunt Celestia's bed. As he pushed him in, his head struck Zenobia's cage. Zenobia raised a shocked fine-lady squawk.

"Confound that bird! Let her once get started, and she'll rouse the whole camp!"

But Zenobia sank into affronted silence. Father hoisted Mercy and thrust her into the wagon. She curled up tight at the back, and pulled the red comforter to her eyes. Luckily the two older boys were sleeping outside to-night. Otherwise the wagon would probably have burst.

"Now for his horse." Father snatched off saddle and bridle, threw them on the ground and gave the horse a slap that started it trotting down the trail to where Button and Betsy were tethered.

"Be thankful Aunty isn't sleeping on her deaf ear!
Here they come!"

He seized his blankets, rolled them around him, and squatted down by the fire. The pounding thunder galloped up the hill. Three horsemen burst into the clearing.

"Hallo, the camp!"

Mercy peeped through a crack.

At that shout Father rolled over drowsily. He straightened up, rubbing his eyes.

"Hallo, I say! Wake up, you!" The leader sprang from his horse, and prodded Father with the butt of his whip.

"Hey, stop that! What's the trouble?" Father scrambled up, yawning violently.

"Trouble, eh? We're a posse from down-river. Sumner County. We're hunting a young whipper-snapper who's been running slaves up north. Drove a wagon load away from the Barclay farm, a big underground station, this morning. Got wind we was after him, so he dumps his load somewhere in the swamps between here and Barclay's, no telling where, and lights out a'horseback. We ain't found no track of the niggers. No use tryin' to hunt 'em through those bogs. But we're out to find him. And get him. We'll make an example of him, mind that. You seen him?"

"I'd say not," lied Father cheerfully. "Sure he came this way?"

"No. We ain't sure of nothin'. But this looks kinder queer. How come you got your coffee-pot on, at two in the morning?"

"Woke up chilly, and wanted something to warm me up. Have some?" Father reached for the big pot. "Say, I must have dropped off. The pot's boiled dry."

"Sure you ain't seen hide nor hair of that boy?"

"Nair hide, nair hair. Search the camp if you want to."

The men hesitated.

"We ain't got a minute to lose. Once he gets to the settlement that Abolitionist gang will hide him out. Spoil our last chance of catchin' him."

"Oh, haven't you a warrant?"

"Warrant? What do we want with a warrant? Hain't he run off with our niggers? Ain't he been stealin' niggers, fast as they can slip across the Ohio? Ain't it high time us citizens took care of our propetty?"

"Well, sorry I can't help. Look all over, if you got time. Easy, though," for one man was poking his head into the covered wagon. "That's my women-folks' wagon. My little boy sleeps there, too. No use scarin' them stiff."

Mercy thought she had covered herself up from top to toe. But one long gleaming braid had fallen outside the blanket, in plain view. Prodded by a watchful guardian angel, little Thomas rolled over at that moment and stuck out a convincing fat leg.

"Say, boys, let's get on. No use giving him time to get clear. Come along!"

With a trampling rush the three were gone. Father slumped down on his tick again, settled apparently into heavy sleep. Mercy lay motionless. She scarcely dared to breathe. At length, her father rose and came quietly to the wagon.

"Still awake, daughter?"

Awake! As if she could go to sleep!

"All right. I'll slide our young man out, and plump him down on the tick with me. I'll let him snooze an hour or so. Then if he can stick on his horse I'd best get him off before daybreak."

The boy groaned and muttered as they dragged him down, but he did not waken.

"Now roll yourself up warm with Aunty, and go to sleep, too. Pop off, quick."

Wholesome advice. For a time she lay staring into the dark, her hands like ice, her heart pounding. But the feather-bed was so deep and cozy, little Thomas had cuddled up so tight, his warm arms were so snuggly around her neck. . . .

“Well, Mercy Rose! Hadn’t you better rouse up, before the boys gobble the last bite of bacon? You—— What in the nation have you done to Joseph’s Coat? *Where’s Uncle’s casket lining?*”

Mercy blinked and sputtered in full daylight. Father, shaven and smart and annoyingly wide awake, stepped in to draw the fire.

“Give the child time to open her eyes, Aunty. . . . Why, a young fellow stopped by last night for help. He’d hurt his arm. That was after you’d gone to bed. I wanted a rag for a bandage. I didn’t realize you prized that piece.”

“Prized it—prized it! I’d rather lose every other keepsake I’ve got!”

“Well, I’m sorry. Maybe if we write back to Lunenburg his daughter-in-law will have another piece.”

“Likely! Where’s that young fellow gone? Perhaps, if we follow him up——”

“It isn’t probable we can catch up with him. By the way, do you realize we’re only eighty miles from our farm? I just figured it up. On my map.”

Only eighty miles! Even Uncle’s lost memento was forgotten in that glad news.

“We ought to make it in six days, John. Five, maybe. If ever I set foot on solid ground again I hope I take root forever. Boys, hark. In maybe four days, we’ll be home.”

Alas, fond hope! Seth being Seth, he proceeded to knock this dream into a cocked hat. Next morning he awoke even earlier than usual, whining and sniffing. Always so sunny,

he was now one embodied grump. His first mouthful brought a wail of dismay.

"Mumps." Aunty poked the poor little swollen jaw with an experienced finger. "I'll lay to it he gets 'em on both sides. Then passes 'em on to the other two. I wouldn't be surprised if you caught 'em yourself, Mercy. And you, John. . . . And maybe the Captain."

"Cassandra wouldn't have had a chance." Father spoke under his breath. "Never mind, Seth. You like mush and milk, and you shall have plenty of that."

They pushed on all that day. But by night, the other two were beginning to swell up like two unhappy little puffballs. Leave it to Seth. "Nobody but Seth could manage to find the mumps in a wilderness like this. Almost in reach of our own cabin, at that!" said Aunty bitterly. "We'll have to stop at the very next tavern. And stay there until all three are well again."

Only seventy miles from their own farm. But no help for it.

The last tavern had been filthy beyond words. But this tavern was worse than filthy. It was sinister. The house had no mistress. A stout surly landlord greeted them ungraciously, thrust them into grimy unkempt rooms, and set wretched food before them. But they dared not leave. The three little boys must be kept warm and quiet at any cost.

Aunty was too exhausted to do much nursing. Mercy did the most of it, with the clumsy willing help of Twonnet, the half-breed girl who was the only servant on the place. Father was good help, too. But the old Captain was a host in himself. He kept the little boys' eyes popping with stories, he sang and sang till his tongue hung out. Neither songs nor stories were exactly orthodox, but what of that? He trudged up and down with Thomas and his nghty

balanced on a trembly old arm as he sang to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne*:

*"Old Grimes is dead, that good old man,
We ne'er shall see him more.
He used to wear an old gray coat,
All buttoned down beeeeeee-fore.*

*"He lived at peace with all mankind.
In friendship he was true.
His coat had pocket-holes behind,
His pantaloons were blue—— B'Gosh!
His pantaloons were blue."*

"Better not let Aunty hear you sing that, Thomas."

"Aunty can't spank me now. I'm too sick. And she
dassent spank the Captain."

When five days had gone by and Mercy was so desperately tired that she blundered off asleep every whipstitch, respite came. Up to the tavern rolled a huge luxurious carriage, all red wheels and real windows and leather cushions and folding steps. Out stepped a gentleman from Virginia and his wife. Four slaves attended them, three sturdy competent men, and one stout beaming mammy, her turban starched till, as Aunty remarked approvingly, it could stand alone. Within the hour the master had made friends with Father. Another hour, and the lady, a very great lady, so sweet, so still, so gentle, in her flowing puce silks and her dim flat-cut old emeralds, had slipped in softly and sent Mercy to bed for the whole afternoon, put Adoniram and Seth to playing checkers, and sat cutting out paper soldiers for Thomas. Never marched such paper soldiers in any regiment since wars began. For the drummer-boy and his drum were so real, you could hear the thump of booted feet, you

could feel the throb and thrill of the drumbeat. And the plumes on the major's shako tossed and waved in the breeze.

Then when the soldiers were all marching, striding, rank on rank across the dingy counterpane, those bewitched scissors, with the gold grapes carved on the handles, set to cutting out a group of trappers, glorious men from the Far North, all in fur parkas, and coonskin caps; the caps so lifelike that every coon flirted his bushy tail at you as they went by. When the trappers had passed, came a ship-load of pirates, tiny swaggering giants in jerkins and jack-boots, their impudent queues tied at the backs of their unsanctified necks. Even a pirate ship, murderous plank and treasure-chests and all, came sailing down the wind from those enchanted scissors.

And presently Thomas keeled over, dead asleep from weariness and joy and wonderment. And all that day, and the next, the lovely lady played with them, so gentle, so sweet, so wise. So that when on the third morning she and her husband must drive away, Donny and Seth looked after them wistfully and Thomas gave way to candid sniffles.

"I will say," thus Aunty, giving Thomas a firm but kindly pat, "I must say that, even though they are slave-holders, they could teach a few professing Christians some things they need to know."

"Slave-holders!" Thomas gasped. "Why, they can't be slave-holders, Aunty. Neither one of 'em has got horns, nor a tail!"

Donny and Seth fell upon him with lavish and jeering correction. Little Thomas sighed. Even at five it is difficult to readjust one's standards in this puzzling world.

As they drove away, unspeakable dullness settled down upon the tavern. But not for long.

Ever since their coming, Aunty had fidgeted whenever

her eye fell on the silent furtive Twonnet. In the gray of the morning she had once heard an angry voice and a scared sobbing answer. Then a blow, a cry.

"Let's get out of here, John. Quick's we can."

"If I thought that brute was abusing the child——"

"Haven't you got plenty of other folks' troubles to stew over, without hunting up some more?"

Father flinched. She was right. Miserably he began to count up. How could this journey have cost so much? How could it be that he had so little, so frighteningly little, left from the sale of the house, the barns? By the time he had bought just the barest needs for the new farm, seed and tools and a few animals, he'd be scraping his last hundred dollars. He had planned to send Mercy away to school for the winter term but six months at Knox College would cost him ninety dollars. An impressive sum. He could have managed it if only Joel had not needed so much. If he weren't grimly sure that Joel would need still more.

Mercy came down the cobwebby hall, the convalescent little Thomas clinging to her skirts. She carried a tray with the boys' suppers. It was heavy and awkward to handle. She heard Twonnet's voice from the side hall. She stopped and called.

"Twonnet! Want to help me carry up this supper?"

No reply.

A heavy step. A door closed, slowly. Then a man's voice on a strange hoarse note, a note that told fury; and something worse than fury.

"I'll show you how to slink off and dodge me! Hell-cat! Take that——"

Then a thin anguished scream.

The hall looked queer and swimmy: red, too. A thick red mist. Mercy set down the tray on a rickety table. Slowly. Carefully.

"Thomas, go straight to your room. Travel."

Thomas never cheeped. He followed like a fat streak at her flying heels.

She sped into the side hall, grasped the doorknob. The door was locked.

"Open this door!"

No answer. She seized it and shook it with all her might. The flimsy lock gave way. She plunged in.

With an oath, the landlord leaped up, whirled to face her.

"You—*beast!*!" Mercy sprang on him, jammed her clenched fists into his face. The astonished man stumbled back, pitched against the wall. The butt of the raw-hide rolled perilously under Mercy's foot, but she caught herself instantly and struck out with every inch of force in her. The man grabbed both her wrists; huge and powerful creature that he was, he would have made short shrift of her, but for two reasons. One was Twonnet. She crawled to her feet, threw herself on him from behind, dug steely fingers into his fat throat. The other was little Thomas. Promptly he went Berserk. Small, but mighty, he grabbed the landlord's knee and sunk his milk teeth, sharp as spurs, into the gross fat leg.

With a screech of pain the man stumbled back, and pitched down flat. As he struggled for footing Mr. Stafford bolted in.

"Mercy! What happened? *What are you doing to my daughter?*"

The landlord shook off his three assailants. He stood purple, gurgling.

"Doin' to your daughter—— My Lord A'mighty, look what she's doin' to me! Smashes down my door and jumps in and lambastes me. And me doin' nothin' at all——"

"Nothing at all? Look at Twonnet! Look at that welt.

You'd knocked her down, you were slashing her in the face——”

“Yeth, thir, and he tried to thmack Mercy, too. I *theen* him.”

Father scooped up his belligerents and hustled them to his own room.

“You might be two raftsmen. While you were at it why didn't you try to gouge his eyes out?”

“I wish I had. I do. I do!” Mercy was sobbing, loud dry sobs of fury. A white line broadened around her mouth. Her hands shook, her face blazed crimson. She was a fury in starched pantaloons and a bird's-nest braid. “The wicked, cruel——”

“Stop that. You'll have hysterics. I'll warn the landlord that if he dares abuse Twonnet again——”

“What good will that do? He's got her here. All to himself. He'll beat her, he'll torture her! Oh, Father, let's take her with us. We've got to get her away from him! I can't leave her here. I won't!”

“Mercy is right, Aunty. No use talking. We've got to take the girl along.”

For weeks Aunty had held herself with a tight rein. She held it now.

“Just as you say, John. Only I sort of wonder—— Do you know anything about her?”

“French father, Indian mother, she says. Bound out to this man and his wife when she was six. That is all she knows.”

“You can see plain enough that's all she knows. Maybe we can teach her to scrub and to cook. Doubt it. Once an Indian, always an Indian. Well. What with you aidin' and abettin' a fugitive from justice that night” (now, how had Aunty guessed that?), “and Mercy gettin' into fist fights over heathen orphans, we're making an elegant start on our

pioneering. But if it suits you, why, I can't complain. At least I wouldn't, if you thought there was any chance of ever comin' up with that young man and Uncle Jonathan's casket lining."

As soon as possible, they left the tavern. Twonnet, dazed, silent, as dumbly grateful as an animal freed from a trap, went with them. Mr. Stafford carried things through with a high hand, although he had expected a pitched battle. But astonishingly the landlord made scant protest. He was subdued to the point of meekness. Only a few weeks ago the countryside had rung with reports of a case where three bound children had been brutally tortured. A mob had formed, and the offender had been tarred and feathered and driven out of the county. The landlord had had a taste of what such indignation might mean. He had no desire for more.

CHAPTER TEN

AGAIN they set forth. But now calamity followed on calamity. The very day they started the wagon broke down. Father and the Captain did some emergency patching, so that they could reach the next clearing, and there they found a forge. The smith and his helper were hurrying to shoe a troop of horses, brought in by a drover. So they shoved the Stafford wagon close to the racks where this troop was hitched, but very casually hitched. The next day, when Father walked down from their camp to drive their wagon back, he did not happen to look at their beloved chairs, lashed to the back of the wagon. But when Aunty started to climb in, there rose a wail.

“John Stafford! *Will* you look at my chairs! Somebody’s slashed the rush seats right out of ‘em!”

“That landlord! I knew he’d be up to something——”

“But, Aunty, they aren’t cut, they’re *chewed*! Just as if a giant mouse had nibbled them.”

Giant mice had nibbled, and to some purpose. The drove of waiting horses had found something with which to fill their time. Not a seat was left whole.

The family gazed on that ruin, aghast.

“We ought to make that drover pay for them.”

“But he’d say it was the blacksmith’s fault. For he shoved the wagon too close to the hitching racks.”

“While we’re about it, let’s see if they’ve chewed anything else.”

“Probably they’ve gnawed up Joseph’s Coat, what’s left of it.” Aunty’s voice dripped gloom.

Joseph’s Coat proved intact, save for the sad vacant

pentagon which Aunty had never ceased to mourn. But the chairs were misfortune enough. To weave rush seats demands real skill. Small chance that anyone in their new home could replace them. And at best, the expense would be past reach.

"We'll knock up some benches out of the goods boxes when we get there. They'll do well enough. Hey, there, where's all that dunnage of yourn?" The Captain pried under the wagon, where had hung the precious little trees in orderly array. Alas, all had vanished: seedlings, roots, bulbs, yarbs, everything.

"No, the horses ain't et 'em up," the Captain shook his head. "They've slipped their moorings, somewhere on the road."

The family, too horrified to speak, stood by, while he inspected the slack cords and ropes.

"Another storm coming up, so's we dassent go back to look for 'em. Oh, well! No telling what'll go wrong by to-morrow." He hacked an extra large chunk from his plug, and clambered to his high seat. As an optimist, thought Father, Cap'n could give points to Bildad the Shuhite.

To-morrow came inexorably. It brought a stormy crimson dawn, a raw wind barbed with sleet. Then the rains descended and the floods came.

They were miles from any tavern, from any grove, from any adequate camping place. Mr. Stafford proudly considered himself an able pioneer, at least in theory. He had heard all about building an open-face camp, he knew precisely where to dig the trenches around it. But how, how could you set about building a log camp with not a tree in sight? Far on the open prairie, at that, with a young cloudburst beating on your wagon roof. And how to camp at all, while water sluiced through your canvas roof and rose to the hubs?

"Goody, goody! We're sailors in a gale, and the ship's

going down right under our feet," chanted Seth, wild with delight.

"I only hope we don't sink with all hands aboard. Captain, what shall we do?"

"Bundle up and kiver up. And let her rain."

Nothing else for it. But this proved a dreary ordeal. Even the little boys' enthusiasm was dampened by sundown. No chance at a hot meal. They sat in a soggy huddle and ate whatever was in reach.

Morning brought leaden skies, but the rain held off; so they started early, and drove on splashing, hour on dreary hour. They plodded through miles on miles of trackless prairie, guided only by the occasional stakes that helped Father to check up on his map.

Steadily the prairie grew wider, wider. Now they were so many castaways, adrift on this endless ocean of dark and sodden land, under this gray and sodden sky.

Zenobia scolded without ceasing. The tired horses struggled through miry roads, which were no more than trails, across sloughs where only the logs thrown down into a semblance of corduroy road saved them from sinking into bottomless mire. Even the little boys grew subdued. Even Mercy drew a little closer to her father, her eyes darkened with a nameless fear.

The utter weariness of this dark endless world, the menace of that dun unchanging sky! She could not know the real prairie: she could not foresee that when spring awoke the prairie would waken into glorious life. Only a few months, and that dull miry stretch would be an ocean of emerald grass, waist-high, shoulder-high, horse-high, a green-gold murmuring sea, starred with a thousand flowers, rippling beneath the sweet winds like a great web of watered silk, now forest-green, now pale lake-silver, now blinding dazzling gold. But to-day, all that her eyes could see was

the gray desolation, the raw and bitter cold, a cold that chilled your body, chilled your soul.

Just before dusk, the trail skirted a great marsh. Father, who had been sitting silent, put the reins into Mercy's hands and pulled out his map.

"We're within two miles of our land. Hallo, Captain! Turn to the left, then down that long slope. We ought to reach our new home in half an hour." But there was no exultation in his voice.

The ragged trail was hardly more than a rut in the sea of mud. Not twenty yards beyond spread the marsh. It reached on and on, an endless sweep, to the dark horizon.

"I don't understand this. There's no marsh indicated on this map. You and the Captain wait a bit." Father gave Mercy the reins, took his riding-horse, and galloped away. It seemed hours before he came galloping back.

He pointed with his whip towards the foot of the slope.
"Our land begins right yonder."

"Our land! It can't be! Why, our land isn't a swamp, it's a farm!"

"Yes, it is ours. It is marked by a split post, with a chain caught through the top, just as Deacon said. There is a house too. If you want to call it that."

Mercy began to tremble. His low voice held a note that terrified.

"According to the Deacon this deed calls for cleared land ready for planting. I—I didn't dream that they'd sell me a swamp. And a clump of woods with not even the brush cut out."

They plodded on. Mercy made out a small log cabin. It stood close to the hummock where the woods began. In all that empty world that cabin was the one sign of life.

"But where's our house, John?"

"Right yonder."

"Right yonder?" Seth shrilled in angry surprise. "But that's not our house, that's our cowshed."

Father laughed out. A queer rasping laugh.

"Then we'll have to live in the cowshed, son. Move along, Button."

They turned into the clearing. Close behind came the Captain driving the big covered wagon. The Captain had never whined all the long hard way. But now he was so tired that his old wits were muddled, his eyes could hardly see. He missed the narrow corduroy road, which led from highway to cabin: the wheels plowed into the rim of the marsh and sank to the hubs. The team struggled to reach the road, but the mire was too deep. They floundered, stumbled; the wagon canted to the left, righted itself, sank again to a hopeless angle. The Captain managed to keep his balance, but all his shouting and urging could not move that wagon one inch. The horses stood with heads hung low. Their miry coats steamed in the cold wind. They did not even look around. They paid no attention to whip or command. They were through.

"Here, I'll help." Donny ran to their heads and coaxed. Thomas and Seth pushed nobly from behind. So did Mercy. Twonnet, too. Father, queerly, paid no attention. He stood staring around the drowned fields, the desolate empty highway. This, then, was the land for which he had spent every dollar that he dared hold back from Joel's need. This was the land that was to carry him through the years of toil that lay before him.

"We can't budge her. Looky, yonder comes a man on horseback. Holler to him. Maybe he'll lend a hand."

The man on horseback splashed and floundered up the road. He was an amazing figure. He was tall, incredibly tall, a very Titan against that dark and lowering sky. His clothes were past belief. A huge gray shawl hung cat-

a-corner over his enormous shoulders, and flapped above an ancient jim-swinger frock coat, green with age, and disreputably crumpled. From that frock-coat, your eye traveled downward to trousers which in some earlier day might have been of adequate length. But nowadays they had been drenched and shrunken till they hunched shin-high above white yarn socks and gigantic soft-sided shoes. He sat hump-shouldered on his big plodding bay. Until he dismounted, you could not dream how tall he was. And when he did dismount, he seemed to let go and lengthen out like a leisurely foot-rule; yards and yards of him stretched up and up till his tall bulging beaver hat must scrape the sky.

"What makes him so terrible big?" Thomas, cold and hungry and scared, clutched Mercy's hand.

"Aw, hush up, Thomas. This is Out West. They grow bigger here." Thus Adoniram, with his invariable weary superiority.

The man bowed to Father and lifted his hat to Aunty. You saw that his face was a gaunt mask of fatigue. But under the coarse black hair, all rumpled and tangled over his great gaunt bony head, his hooded eyes were tired and kind. And his voice boomed friendliness, a slow deep organ note.

"Evening, folks. Let me take a hand here. We all get stalled right by this marsh, every day in the week. Used to it. Digging each other out of the mud is right in the day's work."

He threw off his bulky shawl and the jim-swinger coat. He rolled up his sleeves. His bare arms were masses of corded muscle. Under the bronzed skin, those muscles rippled like knotted heavy silk.

"You take the horses' heads, while I lift from behind." Father protested in amazement.

"You lift? Why, that wagon is loaded to the roof. It

weighs a ton. Don't try that, sir. We'll unpack right here——”

“When I say Go, you h'ist. H'ist like the nation.”

“But, sir——”

“Go!”

The team strained frantically. There was a sucking sound: the wagon wavered, tipped, then plunged out of the mire. It stood, rocking but safe, on the log road.

Even Father, always so tranquil, so urbane, stood gasping at that mighty strength.

“I would not have believed it! Sir, you have my grateful thanks. I cannot understand that you have done this, one man, alone——”

“I did not do it alone. You hefted your share.” The stranger's wide mouth broke into a smile. He brushed the mud from his knees, his shoulders. “You are Mr. Stafford, from Green River, Massachusetts? We had heard that you were driving this way, so I've ridden this road every day, on my way home from Circuit Court. Thought I'd like the chance to meet you, sir. Permit me to welcome you to the Sangamon country. And let me hope that your settlement here will mean happiness and prosperity. This is your family?”

He put out a colossal hand. He seized Thomas by the collar of his roundabout.

Thomas squeaked. Down his fat back sped the tingling, terrifying thrill of a large ice-cold two-cent piece.

“My family, sir. And whom may we thank for this neighborly kindness?”

“I am a backwoods lawyer.” The gaunt stranger scratched his rumpled black head with that huge hand; in the waning light he looked like a tall sober gentle scarecrow. “My name is Abraham Lincoln.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“**S**ETH! *Will* you stop nibbling that parched corn!” Mercy menaced him with the pancake lifter. “Breakfast will be ready in two jiffs. Listen! If you don’t stop, you’ll *sprout!*!”

“Where will I sprout?” inquired Seth with interest.

“Outen your eyes. And your ears. And I’ll hev to plow you and harrow you and weed you night and day, if I figger on any crop.” The Captain pulled a pink ear.

“Something smells elegant,” chirped ’Doniram. “Hey, folks, guess!”

“Sassengers,” piped up the Captain from his big rocker close to the fire. “And they ain’t nobody going to keep tab on me neither!” His clean wrinkled old face, scrubbed as industriously as Seth’s own, was shiny with soap and happiness. His shriveled old hands lay folded on his knees, tranquil with content. To Father this new home might mean crushing disappointment: to the Captain it was foretaste of Paradise. Wasn’t he accorded the warmest corner, the thickest buffalo robe, by common consent? Wasn’t he busy from morning till night, watering the horses, bringing in kindling, planning for long hours on end just where he’d make garden and set out cabbages the minute that spring came? Wasn’t he eagerly consulted twenty times a day on every problem that beset the little boys? Didn’t Father ask his advice? Follow it too? Well, then! What more could a man want?

Mr. Stafford looked at him. Through his fog of anxiety and disappointment he felt a vague comfort. It was some-

thing, to awaken such utter content on the face of a tired forgotten old man.

"Twonnet! *do* look what you're doing! Oh, you're dribbling gravy all over my clean table-cloth! For pity's sake— There, *don't* set that hot skillet down on the high-boy! You'll burn the whole top off! I can hear it sizz!"

Aunty was frantic. Twonnet was always making her frantic. And yet she meant so well! But when she didn't break she spilled, and when she didn't spill she scorched, and when she didn't scorch she—but she always did scorch. Everything she could lay her hands on. Always and forever. The cabin was blue from morning till night with the smoke of blackened toast, the smell of leathery fried eggs, of burnt overshoes and frizzling undershirts. She was not merely awkward, she was Calamity let loose.

"Maybe she'll learn. Some time." Aunty spoke with desperate patience. "I'll say for you, Mercy Rose, you're a sovereign good manager. If it hadn't been for the mumps and the Apostle we'd have been settled long ago." She roused herself to rare praise. "When you think of the hooraws' nest this place was three days ago! And look at it now!"

Father looked. In three days the four log walls and a roof, the icy caves of rooms, the dark narrow hall that ran through the cabin, had grown warm and bright and cozy. The forlorn shelter had become a home.

"The child would make a home in the desert." He put out his hand to her as she flashed by, set down the big platter of cakes and the crackling sausages, swept Donny's spelling book out of his hands, tucked in Seth's napkin, and planted Thomas in his chair with a shake and a kiss, all in the same breath. The little boys turned to her as flowers to the sun. Twonnet, dark, sullen, watched her with eyes that worshiped dreamily—and being Twonnet she splashed a yellow pool of pancake batter on the spotless floor.

"Company's coming. I see 'em. In Aunty's tea-cup." Seth leaned to scrutinize the fragment of leaf.

"Company's here right now." Donny ran to the window. "Looky, it's that big jackknife man that hauled us out of the mud the night we came!"

"And dropped his two-cent piece down my back!" Thomas leaped up in lively hope of favors to come.

"Ask him to breakfast, Father. Hurry, dear! Oh! He looks like an enormous black rooster sitting on a stick nest! *Look!*"

The gaunt roan plodded up the muddy lane. Mr. Lincoln swung leisurely off. Tied to his saddle behind was a bundle of slim black switches.

With his high stovepipe hat, his bony beaked face, his flapping coattails, he was a masculine witch of Salem straddling the withes for a broomstick. He stumbled in, stiff from the long cold daybreak ride, put down his witch-broom, picked up 'Doniram, Seth and Thomas in one fell swoop and squeezed them jointly and severally.

"Lend me a spade, will you?" to Father. "Struck me, the night you folks came, that this place needs a few fruit trees. Nothing on the place but some gnurly apples. Yes, it's a last chance, but even late planting is better than none. Thought we'd stick these peach seedlings in near the well. What d'you say?"

For a minute Mr. Stafford could only stare at the little trees. The thief who had carried off their baby orchard had stolen more than slips and cuttings. He had stolen the very essence of home. These little new trees were so many friendly outstretched hands.

"Of all the neighborly——! Sir, I hardly know how to thank you. We'll plant them at once. But first you will breakfast with us?"

Mr. Lincoln considered that table. The platter of smok-

ing sausages, the stout hospitable coffeepot, the pile of tender cakes.

The old Captain added his welcome.

“Set down, stranger. You’re welcome. Nobody in this house never keeps tab on you, neither.”

“Reckon I will, thank you. I’m riding circuit, and I started from the tavern before five o’clock. Due at the Courthouse by nine. Breakfast wasn’t ready yet. However, that wasn’t any great loss. You know. There’s taverns. And taverns. Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

He sat down, section by section. He squared himself, as a man who approaches an agreeable but important task; cakes, sausages melted before him. The little boys sat spell-bound. From time to time the Captain nodded, encouragingly. Twonnet at the griddle gazed and gazed and slopped more batter.

At last he stood up and bowed to Aunty and Mercy.

“Now for the spade.”

“What kind of trees will they be when they grow up?”

“That depends on yourselves, boys. No telling. Maybe peach-pie trees. Maybe switchin’ trees. You got to settle that. We might plant ’em by the barn, or else over on the Indian mounds.”

“Indian mounds——”

“Why, yes. See? Those three, right yonder. This farm raises a mighty big crop of arrowheads, every year.”

Arrowheads! Indian mounds! Buried treasure!

The three little boys dashed out as if moved by a single spring. They fell upon the nearest mound like three frenzied chipmunks. Mr. Lincoln laughed and followed. But once outside he turned to Father alone.

“I don’t want to be intrusive, sir. But may I ask how you happened to choose this location?”

In his bitter humiliation at the fraud that had been played upon him, Father did not want to confide in any human being. But something in this serious, gentle giant not only invited confidence, it drew it bodily out of you. In ten sentences Father had told him the whole story.

Mr. Lincoln reflected.

"You bought from Timothy Lyman, sight unseen. Well, I'm nobody but a backwoods lawyer. I can't hold out much hope that you'll get your rights now that the sale is closed. But I can pull some of the packing out of this case for you. Timothy Lyman himself bought this land sight unseen. Bought it from a slick-tongued land-agent who sold him this worthless strip of marsh and hookin' quarter, and ground every cent of the top price out of him at that. The minute Timothy laid eyes on it he looked around to unload, you see. And here you were, asking his own brother for advice on location. So between 'em they sawed it off on you. Now the miserable truth is, you'll never make a living for that splendid young family, on this worthless soil——"

"I don't figure on that." Father launched into his great plan. Mr. Lincoln listened. But his steady face took on a slow cold disapproval.

"An Abolitionist newspaper—— Well. Far's I'm concerned I'm afraid you've come to the goat's house for wool. I hope I'll live to see slavery abolished. But by ballots, not bullets. By mutual agreement, never by the sword."

"How many centuries will it take," Mr. Stafford flared up promptly, "to educate people up to that point?"

"As soon as men come to realize that the slavery issue spells danger every hour to the unity of this nation——"

"Meanwhile this monstrous situation will go on and on, in injustice, in cruel suffering."

"I see your point of view." Mr. Lincoln halted. He

stared down the stretch of dark November fields. "But you've got to look at it with a cold mind. We've got to hold our union together, a union inseparable. But we can't settle the whole slavery problem in one morning. Perhaps—" He spoke rather shyly. "D'you care to ride into town with me? I'd like to have you meet some friends of mine. And talk over your plans."

Father agreed eagerly. When he started home six hours later, all his black depression had vanished as the morning dew. He was boyishly happy. Mr. Lincoln, awkward, diffident, gentle, had taken him about to meet all the substantial citizens of Bakerstown, and these men had treated him like visiting royalty. It meant something, this was evident, to be introduced by this big clumsy backwoods lawyer. Generous welcome, hearty encouragement, ready Western friendliness, all were lavished upon him. With such allies as these, how could he fail? How could he grow despondent, even?

He turned into the crossroads and galloped Button down to the Corners' Postoffice, hardly two miles from his home. By to-day, there would surely be mail for him.

There was mail. A handful of letters. He looked through them with shaking eagerness. But nothing from Joel. However, on the next stage from Chicago, there would surely be some news from him.

But while there was no word from Joel, there was a letter from Horace Mann. A glowing enthusiastic letter.

"I am thankful to tell you that we are actually getting under way. Nothing marvelous yet. But we are glad of every new pupil. Of course we need money. Only a few of our young folks can pay the cost of tuition, which is twelve dollars a year. To say nothing of their living expenses. For those who are well-to-do, I have fixed the price of board and room at two dollars a week. That

sounds exorbitant, but you would be surprised to learn that it barely covers the cost of food and fuel. My faculty feels that each member should have thirty dollars a month, so generous friends in Boston are paying the salaries. We have eight instructors, so that is a terrible expense; but so far it has been Providentially met. My great dream is to see the day when every student will be able to work his way through college and be prepared to meet the world, twice armed by a training both of brain and of hands. If only we workers were given a few more years, Stafford! But sheer need will raise up a man to fill my place. My dream, even as your own dream of freedom, will be made real. Even if we, ourselves, do not live to see the day.

"I want you to send me your daughter, for a term, at least. Mrs. Mann will keep a motherly eye on her. I need not tell you that she will be as welcome as the day, and you shall be at no expense for her, none whatever. Thanks to our generous friends, we have a hundred and fourteen dollars in our treasury, which gives us an abundance to go on.

"With deep respect, and with every good wish for the welfare of your own splendid plans,

Your Friend,
HORACE MANN."

"If only I could send the child! But till I hear from Joel I dare not spend a cent beyond our bare living. Perhaps if I hadn't brought the Captain along—but he surely earned his salt on the journey. And he tries so hard to help! Then Twonnet—but I'd not sleep if we'd left her behind. And how I could manage without Mercy right now—No, I couldn't spare her, not even if I had the money at hand. Maybe, by spring—"

He turned Button towards home. But the postmaster shouted after him.

"Hey, you got a Mercy Rose Stafford at your house? Here's a letter for her, too. 'Most forgot it."

He took the letter. It was a pale and tender blue. It was addressed in a large round youthful hand, adorned with plenty of deep-shaded spraggles and swoops. It was sealed by a pair of highly colored embossed doves. He need not read the return address. "Return to Lemuel G. Crowther, Green River, Mass."

Just what he might have expected. A surge of frightened jealousy went over him, an icy wave.

Oh, well. This was what you got for being a father. You loved your children so terribly, you gave up everything for them, you spent yourself body and soul year after year. Then, just as they've grown to be some real comfort, along comes a wistful knock-kneed lump, all oiled and curled like a young Assyrian bull, and falls over his large feet and gasps out his imbecile worship. Does your child laugh at him and send him away? She does not. She listens. Not only listens, but smiles on him, gives him permission to write to her, to pour out his mushy soul. . . .

Mercy was sitting at the east window. Three young archaeologists swarmed over her, their faces grimy with mud, their hands full of arrowheads and bits of queer gray pottery. Armed with the fireshovel and a couple of trowels, they had plunged into excavation the minute they had come back from school. They fell on their father with exultant whoops.

"Yes, yes, I see. I see. Don't all climb my back at once. Mercy, my child"—he hesitated—that wave of funny pitiful jealousy swept him again. "Here's a letter."

Mercy reached for it eagerly. Cruel eagerness! Her

grave eyes lighted. Her petal cheek colored like an anemone in the wind.

As she read, that soft rose deepened to scarlet. She thrust the letter into her belt, she leaned against the window, and stared down the road. Past the row of Indian mounds, past the marsh, away to the east, far, far.

John Stafford watched her with impatient eyes. Looking back eastward, was she? Looking back towards the hills of her old home, the elm-shaded lanes where she had walked with that young oaf, the garden path where he had bowed his chucklehead before her! Yes, this was what you got, for being a father. Once in a lifetime they gave you an hour or so of happiness. And you, you poor fool, you went on hoping for more and more. But just let them grow up, and see how quickly they can forget you, throw you away!

Mercy was looking eastward, indeed. Looking back and seeing all too clearly the face of Lemuel. But the crimson in her cheeks was not the crimson signal of her love. Rather was it the guilty flush of shame. For consider: here she sat, an engaged woman; a settled woman, as Aunty would sedately say. Yet how shockingly had she betrayed her promises! Not exactly promises in word, but in spirit! True, it was not her fault that Father, in his desperate haste, had snatched away her ribbon, ring and all. But within her there must be a deplorable element of light-mindedness. Fickleness, even. For now she saw Lemuel as he really was. Stout, solemn, his blue eyes slightly popped with emotion, his pumpkin hair arranged in its imperishable spit-curls. But to-day no knightly panoply enfolded him. No longer did a golden helmet crown those ringlets. Upon his image there shone no glamor, although her memory still caught the gleam of Aunty's gilt birdcage paint. And crowding upon that vision, thrusting it back, there

came a keener, clearer vision. Not really a vision: rather a glint, a flying shadow. The blood-masked face of a boy in shabby riding-clothes. The clutch of cold groping fingers. The weight of a dark head against her knee.

She jerked herself away. Dutifully, resolutely, she re-read Lemuel's letter. From his desk, her father looked across at her with anxious eyes.

“Miss MERCY ROSE STAFFORD—
Bakerstown P.O.
Sangamon County,
Illinois.

ESTEEMED FRIEND:

“*Dear Dearest Mercy: I have been verry lonesome since you and your respected Family set off for the Far West. I wish I was going out west. Pa says maybe we will all go west in the spring. In which case we will proberly locate near you. I wish you would tell your folks we are going to be married and let me tell my folks here for they are all saying you fooled with me and then gave me the Mitten and I want to make them set up and take notice. Also when they know I am Engaged, those girls up to the Academy will let me alone for as it is they run me up a tree.*

“*I wish to be remembered respectfully to your father and Aunty. If we go west I hope my pa will buy land that joins your pa's for it is always a good thing for to join up lands if you are planning to get married to anybody.*

“*We have had 3 big snows and I got to take my bobsled to the forge and have the runners sharpened. I wish I could take you sledding up Kimball Hill. I am going sledding to-night with a crowd of fellows but I would swop them all for one girl.*

“*Guess who.*

“*I found this poem in The Lady's Book of Flowers and*

Poetry. It is by N. P. Willis. It has a beautiful sentiment. It reminds me of you and me.

With Sincere regard, I am

Your Engaged Husband,

LEMU^EL G. CROWTHER."

"Any news from home, Mercy?" Thus Aunty, rousing from her dose. Aunty dozed a good deal these days. Her frail old body had a warped look. Her lips were gray.

"N-no. Nothing much. Only Lemuel says maybe their whole family will come west in the spring."

"Oh. They will." Father went on with his writing. But the quill bent and spattered and finally splintered in his hard grip. Angry pulses hammered in his throat. Well, let him come. Much good would it do him! By March at the latest, Joel would surely pay back some of that money. The minute it reached his hands he would send as large a portion as he dared to Horace Mann. With it he would send Mercy. And at Antioch, under Mrs. Mann's eyes, she would stay, till the fond Lemuel was firmly married to some other girl.

"That'll be soon enough, if I'm any judge. The great softy!"

Heaven be praised for the cloistered security of Antioch!

Next morning, a sharp freeze made the roads a shade less impossible. Father hitched up and took Aunty and Mercy to Bakerstown, to see his new press. Inwardly he desired to crow over Aunty, for the little press had proved to be anything but a mess of rust. It was primitive enough, but in good trim, and there were abundant supplies in the tight little shack which was office, composing room, everything in one. The little boys yearned loudly to go, but Father put his foot down.

"We'll be away only a few hours. Trot along to school.

And when you come home, mind you obey Twonnet."

"I only hope she doesn't scorch anything while we're away."

Aunty sniffed.

"She's scorched everything already, but the roof. And the little boys."

In twenty-four hours, by some mysterious wireless telegraphy, the word of their coming had flown through the whole township, and had prepared for them a generous welcome. They started home in high spirits. Even Aunty glowed. For hadn't she been urged to join the church sewing society and the neighborhood prayer meeting, and bidden to three house-raising dinners in the next week?

They drove into their home lane and stopped at the barn. Trouble, their new puppy, ran ahead and sniffed at the closed door. Then with a yelp that was all but a shriek, he turned and hurled himself back towards the house. Tail at half-mast, yelping like a banshee, he leaped and scratched and whined to get in.

"What ails Trouble——? Here——! Whoa! Hang on tight, Aunty. What on earth——"

CHAPTER TWELVE

BUTTON and Betsy, always so docile, were rearing and plunging. Father gripped the reins, leaned far over the dash-board, dragged and tugged with all his might.

The carryall lurched, tilted. The horses bucked and backed and struggled.

“Hang tight, Aunty! Hold on, Mercy! Whoa, I tell you! Whoa!”

“It’s the barn, Father! They’re just like Trouble, they’re frightened to death of the barn——”

“Of all the demented—— Whoa, stop it! *Whoa*, I say——!”

He drove the frantic creatures across the field a hundred yards away from the barn. Out of scent of the building they gave way trembling. Sweat poured off their thick winter coats. They backed and flinched and quivered, they rolled terrified eyes towards the barn.

“Some wild animal—— But where are the children! What on earth has become of Twonnet——?”

He tied the horses securely to the fence. He ran back. But when he was halfway back, the barn door opened. Out booted a geyser of boys. His own three came first. Then a deluge of small boys, middle-sized boys, tall gangling boys.

“Oh, Father, oh, Father!” Adoniram got there first. Adoniram’s face was almost purple, his freckles fairly stood out in relief. “Oh, oh, we were all coming home from school and right on the turnpike, we met them—— And

oh, we got a circus! A real live circus, and a real live roaring lion! Right here, in our own barn!"

"What under the firmament——"

"Yes, sirree. And all the fellows was coming out of school, and they all swarmed around the circus——" Seth took up the tale. "And they acted awful rude and mean, and made fun of the poor man in the gold wagon, and throwed sticks at him, and we told them to quit! And they wouldn't quit. They followed us clear up the road. The man is sick, so sick, he couldn't climb out of his wagon, he's got the reins hung on a hook, 'cause he can't drive, even. We told him he could come stay to-night in our barn. But he couldn't answer us back he just talks so funny, we can't tell one word he says. And the other fellows kept right on behind, and they tagged us right into our barn, they wouldn't go away. And they've kept on a-plaguin' the poor man, and a-pestering him——"

"Clear out, boys." Mr. Stafford pushed his way through the pop-eyed mob.

"Monkeyth!" Thomas was all but incoherent. "Monkeyth, and a spotty dog that does trickth! Oh, oh, Father——! And a red wagon, all over gold ladies without any clothes on, and two ponies, all spots, too. Oh, Father! Can't we keep 'em always? We can fix up a circus right in our barn, and charge ten cents and make hundreds and millions of dollars—— Oh, Father, we *got* to!"

Father waded through them into the barn. From a dark corner, four small half-frozen monkeys shrieked and gibbered. Beside them, crouched in his tarnished cage, shivered a sad moth-eaten old lion. But Father went straight to the scandalous gold wagon.

"Clear out, boys. You're in the way. Get along, I tell you. And be quick about it."

The mob from District School Number Two stood aside, grudgingly.

"He ain't nobody but a furriner," drawled one tall somber-eyed boy. "Can't so much as tell his name."

He prodded the wan little shape, sprawled on the tattered blanket, with a large grimy hand. It was not a cruel prod. It was merely experimental. Briefly, would a furriner squirm if you punched him?

But Editor Stafford, finicky creature that he was, flared up like a rocket. The heavy buggy-whip was still gripped in his hand. He wheeled in a flash and brought the whip curling across the boy's shoulders.

"Get along with you! Keep your hands off, you young fool. Clear out, every last one of you. March!"

The barn cleared as if by magic. But the older boys went scowling and muttering. Things had come to a pretty pass if you couldn't so much as punch a furriner, nor throw sticks at him, even!

Father bent again over the dark little wraith in the wagon. The man's twisted brown hands were thin as the monkey's claws. His black eyes were bright with fever. Weakly he pulled himself up and began to sputter in Italian. Father took good grip on his own scanty understanding thereof.

Two minutes later, he hurried back to the house. He paid no heed to the storm of questions that greeted him. He heated a pitcher of milk, rolled up a couple of blankets, and set the soapstones to warm. Then he addressed his distraught family.

"Keep out of that barn. Every one of you. Thomas Stafford, this means you. Not one of you go near it unless I give you leave. No, Aunty, I don't need you. First I've got to get some food into this starved little chap, and thaw him out——"

"For pity's sake, John Stafford, and you don't even know his name——"

"Well, what of it? His first name is Giovanni. That's all I've tried to get out of him. He's too beat to say any more——"

"Yes, sir, Aunty, and Father made the boys get out, and get out quick. He even took his whip to 'em. Even that big bully of a Jim Wallis. Just give him one switch, and did he hop it? He was a-pokin' the poor circus man, and a-proddin' him, an' a-tormentin' him——"

"Jo Vanny." Aunty reflected. "That's a regular New England name, John. I knew a wood-chopper once, down Ipswich way, a Portugoose he was, that sounded like that——"

"And next thing, I'm going straight back to Bakerstown, and bring the doctor. We'll find out what ails him."

"Smallpox, most like. And we'll every one of us get it."

"No telling. Here, somebody hurry up those soapstones!"

At that, Twonnet emerged from her hiding-place behind the big pineapple bed. When the crowd had swarmed into the yard, Twonnet had decided to take no chances.

Willingly she crowded in fuel. The soapstones didn't scorch but they did crack. But in the excitement, nobody noticed that.

Everybody waited, agog, till Father came galloping back. Behind him rode the doctor, in his high mud-spattered gig. Both men tied their horses to the front rail, some distance from the barn. But the barn door stood open, and the doctor's mare caught a good jungle whiff. She danced and flounced and curveted. Finally she managed to jerk the reins loose, tangle herself in them, and break a shaft. Disgustedly the doctor hauled her to her feet, where she stood trembling, actually faint with panic.

"Before you get through with this performance, you'll

have to get rid of this wild-beast odor. And before you can do that, you'll have to burn down your barn."

"We'll put Twonnet at that chore. Now what ails this poor little wretch? Smallpox?"

"Smallpox? Starvation, you mean. And a bad knee—poor little chap, he's crippled up for months to come. His animals are in bad shape, too. Looks like you'll have the whole outfit on your hands. It ought not take more than ten pounds of fresh meat a day to put that lion into top-notch trim."

"Fresh meat isn't easy to come by out here, now that fall butchering is over with. But I might utilize the little boys."

Father's voice was somewhat grim. You couldn't turn away this poor little crumpled, famished foreigner. "But I don't see myself taking the food out of my own children's mouths to keep life in a weak-kneed old lion."

Floods of tears greeted his decision.

"Stop howling, Thomas. Listen to me. This poor man says he knows he cannot feed the lion any longer. He realizes too that the lion will not live through the bitter cold. He himself is too sick and weak to go away. Worse, he has no place to go. So he says, Do as you think best. So we will manage to keep the ponies for him, through the winter. And, if we can, the monkeys. But the lion will have to be—sent away."

"Oh, but, Father! I'll let him sleep in my loft, I'll give him all my breakfast——"

"And I'll let him have my blanket——"

"That will do, boys. You must leave this to me. Remember, the ponies will stay a while. Possibly the man will let you ride them."

Pallid hope lightened that black despair.

"I suppose I've got to take the lion out while the boys

are at school and shoot him," Father told Mercy. "When I was a young fellow, I used to dream of the day when I'd be rich enough to build a ship and sail away to Africa and go lion-hunting. But I never dreamed that I'd reach the point where I'd go lion-hunting in my own back yard and shoot a poor guileless old beast right down in his own cage."

But right there, up rose Aunty.

"One thing certain, John. While these creatures stay here with us, they've got to be made comfortable. You build a good fire in the lean-to, and we'll make up a warm bed for Jo Vanny. Then I'll tend to the animals. The monkeys are all sneezing, and the lion looks as if he'd have chills and fever by supper time. Mercy, make some sage tea, and stew up some onions and molasses. Twonnet, fix me a kettle of boiling water, if you can boil it without burning it. Seth, you run up attic and find my old red check shawl. Yes, and the sack of linseed, too."

Everybody obeyed on the jump. At what ensued, nobody cracked a smile. But years after, Mercy would waken and lie shaking in her bed at the thought of Aunty's patient ministries.

First Jo Vanny himself, despite the pitiful pleading in his eyes, was plastered with scalding linseed poultices, rolled in hot blankets, and filled to the Plimsoll mark with boiling yarb tea.

Then Aunty laid firm hands upon the spotty dog and his torn paw. She bathed it carefully and tied on a wad of clean rags.

The spotty dog was fat and scant of breath, with a broad, plaintive face, even more freckly than Adoniram's. He limped and wheezed about like a gouty old gentleman, he held his wrapped foot tenderly aloft and yapped testy alarm if anybody dared pat him, even. Next came the

monkeys' turn. Every one of the four had a cold in his mournful head. First she fed each a great saucerful of stewed onion and molasses. They eyed this unholy brew with dubious eyes, but they gulped it down without demur. Then Aunty tore the red check shawl into squares and bundled up each wizened head with a tidy knot atop. They looked like so many sad little black mammies with the toothache. When she came to the smallest monkey, who was wheezing dismally, she wound the last pieces of shawl over his poor little panting chest, and fastened them with a large brass pin.

"Well, *that* chore's chores! Now what?"

"Now for the lion." Little Thomas pranced with rapturous dread.

Aunty scrutinized the lion. He had reached the yawn stage of his chill. Even as she gazed, his mighty jaws parted: she looked down into an incredible gulf. Aunty knew not the face of fear, but at that fathomless abyss she flinched a shade.

"What he needs is onions and molasses, about a gallon and a half, I'd say, spooned down him so quick, he wouldn't have time to fuss. And a linseed poultice, same's Jo Vanny himself. But I don't aim to be et up by any circus lion, especially at my time of life. No, you needn't flourish that dipper at me, Seth, for I won't try to dose him and you shan't. We'll hang this old carpet over his cage, to keep out the draft. Then that old Rising Sun bedquilt has considerable warmth left. Step and fetch it, Thomas. You help me with the step-ladder, 'Doniram."

Calmly she ascended the ladder; calmly she opened the trap-door in the top of the cage. Calmly she lowered the Rising Sun quilt until it fell on the lion's hunched shoulders. Miraculously, he did not snatch it away. Perhaps he was too chilled to move. At any rate, he did not even stir.

He crouched there like a tired old man, the Rising Sun quilt draped like a green and red and orange robe of coronation over his ponderous old back.

"Now if your father makes up his mind to shoot him—well. At least he will have had a few hours of comfort, first."

But late that afternoon, Mr. Lincoln stopped in.

"Understand the Ark grounded in your barn, lately."

"The Ark," agreed Father, "and most of the animals. Especially a white elephant of a lion. Take a look."

Mr. Lincoln stalked out to the barn. At sight of the casualties, he sat down hastily on the wheelbarrow, and rocked back and forth. Finally he regained his composure. He then felt in his trousers pockets. Not finding that which he sought, he dug down till he reached his gold belt. He slid a heavy gleaming coin into Father's hand.

"You've got a land-office job on your hands," he answered Father's protest. "No almshouse in this county, either. The least that your neighbors can do is to give you a boost. Now, about this ferocious collection, of course you can't keep it. For one thing, you'll have to build a new barn. You can see for yourself, horses and jungle beasts don't mix. Perhaps you can keep the monkeys in that shed down by the marsh. But it's a pity to throw away an able-bodied lion."

"But what can I do with him?"

"I'm coming to that. Tied up below Beardstown is a little flat-boat that gives shows up and down the river summers, and floats down to New Orleans for the winters. They carry a trick parrot and a wildcat and so on. They start down-river this week, the owner told me. Why not pile your assortment into the Ark, drive down to Beardstown, and strike a bargain with the owner?"

No sooner said than done. Absurdly chicken-hearted,

Father waited till the boys had gone to school. Then he and Mr. Lincoln drove away, shocking gilt wagon, piebald ponies, monkeys, lion, and all. Be it admitted that he squirmed a bit. For John Stafford, son of the Green River Staffords, to appear driving a circus van on the week of his arrival in a new country!

However, he was spared all embarrassment, for they met only three teams, and at the first faint whiff, these three promptly stampeded into the prairie. Further, by the time that the two reached home they were deep in an argument that threatened to shatter this new friendship to bits.

“But I repeat, sir, it is no matter, which side began this wrangle. North or South, what difference——”

“W-well. Better to wait till the whole nation is aroused——”

“Wait, eh? Wait for what?”

“But you don’t see eye for me, Mr. Stafford. The sooner a bad law is repealed, the better. But until it is repealed——”

“Isn’t there a higher law? The law of humanity——”

“Father! Look at you, driving right into the buttery door! Oh, and Mr. Lincoln came home with you! Please come right in and have supper with us—please! Aunty baked a ’lection cake, a big one, and we’ve got roast potatoes and squirrel stew with lots of gravy, and cold wild goose and broiled partridges besides. Your place is all set for you, Mr. Lincoln. Oh, please!”

“Yes, and how did your bargain come out? Tell us, right straight.” Thus Aunty.

Mr. Lincoln grinned at Father. Father grinned back.

“Let me tell it, Stafford?”

“Go ahead.”

“Well. We told that flatboater,” he spoke with a face of putty innocence, “that the lion was the finest bargain he’d

find in a year to come. Pointed out that he'd earn his board and keep, twenty times over. He was easily persuaded until along came his wife. She's one of those imperial women. Yes, I'd say imperial is just the word. She sailed into the subject and into us, heart and soul. She told him how witless he was to let us coax him into boarding the lion all winter, and she mentioned several other bargains he had made that didn't turn out so well, and finally she said, 'If that lion comes aboard, that's where I leave.' But that flatboatman—well, there's something superhuman about him. Did he knuckle down to her? Not he. He let her talk on and on. Then, right before her eyes, he up and pulled out his wallet and paid Mr. Stafford for his kindness in bringing the lion down to Beardstown. Then he added six dollars more, for lion-rent through the winter."

Slavery, abolition, receded into the middle distance. As Father drove the red-and-gold wagon out of the buttery and into the barn, he reflected with a mild chuckle that for him to make a spectacle of himself as he had done to-day, would hardly win for him the serious attention of his associates. But the circus van was not merely a circus van with unabashed gilt ladies on it. It was to prove a car of destiny.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A NIGHT or so later, Mercy sat writing in her diary, full speed ahead. Seth and Thomas were properly asleep in their own loft, but Adoniram had been seized with a lonesome streak.

“ ‘N’ I feel awful. ‘N’ I want sleep right ‘longside of you.”

Consequently Mercy had hauled out the trundle-bed from which Thomas had so proudly graduated in Green River. Ample for Thomas, it was a Procrustean fit for Donny, whose lanky legs waved over the foot while his skull jammed the head-board. But he had dropped off comforted, a fold of his sister’s dress gripped tight in one small freckled hand. Mercy’s pen raced on.

“If we were back in Green River, we’d think we were dreadfully unlucky, for this house is so small, and only four real rooms to it, besides the lofts, and you have to climb up to them by ladders. But there is a lean-to with a big fireplace in it; we’re going to give it to the Captain for his own. And there is a fair-sized barn, and a shed near the marsh for Jo Vanny to live in and keep the animals, except the lion, Cartouche, and the monkeys that went south on the flat-boat with him. And when summer comes there will be loads of wild flowers in the marsh. But not one solitary tree. Only the little peach-pie trees that Mr. Lincoln brought.

“Of course I can manage all right, though it is handier to keep a house with ten rooms, besides the toolhouse and the carriage-house and a big barn and a wagon-shed and all

the rest. Besides back home we had water piped into the house, and that is much easier than carrying it all the time. The Captain pumps lots, but he gets tired, and then he splashes so. And Twonnet forgets or else she fusses at the Captain for spilling and he snaps back at her. Aunty is right. If the mumps and the Apostle hadn't delayed us so, we'd have been settled long ago.

"All our old things look hustled and scared and queer. We had to nail board seats onto Aunty's chairs where the horses chewed them and it makes them look too forlorn, and we couldn't get the pineapple bed into the house unless we chopped off the poor little pineapple hands first, and the carpets are miles too big, and the eagle mirror has to sit flat on the floor.

"I'm beginning to see what Mr. Emerson meant when he scolded Father so, and told him he wasn't pioneer material. If we didn't have Mr. Lincoln around, I don't see how we would ever manage. He drops in almost every day, and he always finds something to do. He chops wood and he surveyed our land over again and found it was six acres short, so he took Father into town and hunted up Mr. Timothy Lyman, and told him he'd have to make a new deed and have it recorded. Mr. Timothy said, very brash indeed, Oh, is *that* so, the sale is over and done with, and Mr. Lincoln told him, Oh, all right, we will see what the court says about that. Then Mr. Timothy said, Do you want to ruin me, Lawyer Lincoln and Mr. Lincoln told him, Not for untold riches. I merely want to help your good deeds to shine out in a naughty world. So Mr. Timothy gave in and now we have six more acres of good plow land.

"Father says he is going to farm the place himself, but I don't see how he can, for he works so hard down at the office, as it is, and prints dozens of hand-bills every day.

We are thankful that he has them to do, for every little helps. Mr. Lincoln has brought the cunningest yellow puppy for the little boys, and the little boys are ready to burst with pride because Mr. Lincoln told them he was at least six kinds of dog, maybe more. His name is Trouble, and he certainly earns it, for he is cutting his teeth on everything. But we all love him. Except maybe Aunty.

"People here are pretty much like the way they are everywhere else, except in some ways they are different. I am going to the office to help Father, all next week. It would be lots of fun if it wasn't for the Owens. There are two Owens, and they are forever hanging around Father's office, and acting as if they owned the place and Father and me and all. They are brothers and sort of youngish and very rich. They own two thousand acres of splendid land and they have no end of cows and horses and they drive the fastest teams in the state. Folks all tell you so. They wear the most elegant checked suits and stovepipe hats every single day and enormous diamond rings and high shiny boots. Father says you can see to shave yourself in them. The elder Owen is all right, they say, but Frederick, the younger, is a Smart Aleck if ever I saw one. I have never laid eyes on him but once. However, that once was enough for me.

"Bakerstown has lots of stores but only one church. Folks call it the Lord's Barn, and anybody who feels he has a call can come along and preach in it. It has benches instead of pews, and last Sunday there was a Campbellite audience, and the week before came the Hard-shell Baptists, and to-morrow we shall have the privilege of hearing a prominent Phrenologist from Boston.

"I have not had a letter from Lemuel, only the one Father brought from the office the other night. I do not worry much about Lemuel. In this letter he said, What

with the town girls and the Academy girls both he was surrounded by Temptation and he did wish I would write home and tell everybody that I am engaged to him.

"I wish he would yield to his old Temptations and quit pestering me."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE CLARION CALL OF FREEDOM

Volume One. Published at Bakerstown, Illinois. Number One

December first, eighteen hundred and fifty

State Sovereignty and National Union

FATHER pulled out the damp page with hands that shook. The first copy of his new paper. He had written it and set it up and toiled over it inch by inch. Here it stood, the bodying forth of his long dream.

The *Clarion* had just four large flapping pages. The front page bore a majestic heading portraying the Goddess of Liberty blowing a trumpet. Evidently the *Clarion* itself. On her robust shoulder perched the Eagle, a meek and lop-sided eagle, but fairly impressive. From its beak floated a scroll which set forth the invariable slogan: "State Sovereignty and National Union."

The entire first page was devoted to the first installment of that thrilling and meritorious novel, *The Bandit's Bride*, by L. M. Alcott, and two solid columns of appalling obituary poetry by home talent. Forthright and two-fisted home talent. Father had groaned at the avalanche of harmony that descended on him from the first hour. But Mr. Lincoln urged him to print every word that was sent in.

"Remember, Stafford. You can criticize a man's looks, or his clothes, or his wife. You can give it out that he has

sneaked out here to live down a regrettable past. You can spread the glad tidings that back east he was well known as a miser and a usurer, a liar and a horse-thief. All that will be forgiven you. But if he sends in a chunk of obituary poetry, publish it. No matter though it has stringhalt and is sway-backed and lame in both knees. Publish it. And plaster it up with praise. For you've got a growing family to support. You don't want to be cut down in the prime of life. Not yet."

Hence the flow of soul that spread over the front page and splashed melodious trickles on the inner pages, too.

After you had waded through that freshet of harmony you climbed on the extremely dry land of the inner pages. A few lines of news; a long and harrowing description, by an eye-witness, of the battle of Buena Vista, which had occurred only four or five years ago; one or two items concerning a recent county election, during which several gentlemen received black eyes and various bruises; a column of land sales. Next, the advertisements: Fresh Eggs at five cents the dozen, Butter eight cents a pound, Fresh Venison the quarter, seventy-five cents. In more impressive type, "C. Warren, Apothecary. Also deals in Shoes, Tinware, Violins, Fodder, and Seraphines." "J. D. Badger, Stylish Daguerrier." "John Carter, Genteel Undertaker." "E. Guthrie, Mouth Organs, Tuning Forks, Files, Saws, and Gen'l Hardware." The half-column of bank-paper values, copied from *The Detector*, completed the issue. All but one short paragraph.

This paragraph headed the Editorial Column, the most conspicuous place to be found. It was not merely an editorial. It was a slogan.

"The Editor is informed that there exists in this district a division of opinion on the subject of Negro Slavery.

We wish to place ourselves on record as being unalterably opposed to the continued existence of Slavery. We demand of our Government its immediate Abolition. Abolition by purchase and colonization, by measures of peace, if that be possible. But Abolition, even though it may be consummated only by the Sword."

He read that paragraph twice. Then he folded the paper and went out on the dull December street. He was shaking with exultation. A fever of triumph swept him. He had carried out his lifelong wish. He had made his creed so clear, so convincing, that it seemed impossible that any human being could fail to accept it. His battle was as good as won. He drove home at top speed, dizzy and afame with glory.

He sprang off Button and banged into the living-room.

"Mercy Rose! See what I've brought for you. Look!"

The living-room was warm and silent. He called again. From the sofa in her own room, Aunty called feebly:

"She went to the schoolhouse for the little boys. Then she said they'd all walk to the postoffice and bring the mail."

Father's exultation dimmed. He scowled irritably. What possessed her? Didn't she know that his paper was coming out to-day? Why couldn't she have stayed at home this day of all days?

He chafed in silence till she came. There had been a light fall of snow followed by a crispy crunch of sleet. So the little boys had taken their sleds and she rode home in bumpy state, hauled first on one sled, then on another. The sharp air lit steady fires in her gray eyes, colored her petal cheeks to fiery rose. Sticking from the pocket of her short jacket he glimpsed a pale blue envelope. Behind that envelope you could see two wistful pale blue eyes, two

pale tow spit-curls. You staggered under a thunderous whiff of bergamot. . . .

Not one word did Mercy speak regarding that letter. And to her father this silence was in itself betrayal. In the midst of her eager, anxious praise he saw her hand stray to touch that envelope.

"And what do you say to my editorial, Mercy? I plan to keep it standing permanently at the head of that column. They shall not say I am evading the issue."

"Your—— Why, yes. Why, it's perfectly splendid, Father. I don't believe there is another editor in America who could have written it half so well. Whenever I think of it I'm going to be prouder of you than ever."

Loyal, loving, proud. Flesh of his flesh. Core of his lonely soul. And to-day farther from him than the farthest star.

The winter weeks slipped by, beads of pale amber and snow and pearl on a string of silver frost. Every day brought new puzzles for Mercy. Her days were swifter than the flying clouds. Somehow the *Clarion* did not exactly prosper. For one thing, some of the solid citizens from whom Father had expected both approval and coöperation drew back. Drew back and looked down their worthy noses from the moment that they laid eyes on the first issue. They admired the paper. Oh, surely. But if Father dared refer to that editorial challenge, his slogan, there fell a blighting silence. Sometimes an even more blighting comment.

"Tell 'em that if they don't like your slogan, Father, they can lump it."

"They're not really bitter against my beliefs. They hate the thought of agitation, that's all. They want to slide along in their comfortable old groove."

"Let them slide, then. They can't discourage you, anyway."

"They're rather discouraging to my pocketbook, though. Sorry to admit it."

Another unexpected difficulty lay in the reluctance of the subscribers to pay up in real money. Instead, they would haul in a load of wood, poor wood at that; a few bushels of vegetables, a half-dozen chickens. The little office grew cluttered with artless swaps. A patent churn, which shot a geyser of cream to the ceiling on its first tryout, a farm gate which shut automatically but wouldn't open unless you took the ax to it, a rickety melodeon, a collection of preserves from some too-thrifty pantry, proffered with the air of an all-too-cheerful giver, and proving to be either sugared off or worked. And then the turnips! Evidently the editor who preceded Father had cherished a guilty passion for turnips. They stood stacked in bushels on the office floor till the Captain got around to digging a pit for them, under the barn. And the gnarly apples and sad, stringy carrots and cabbages that looked as if they had been buried once and then dug up again! But the supreme offering was the fearful and wonderful portrait of his maternal grandfather brought by one frugal subscriber. This ancestor had been without doubt an estimable citizen, a good provider, a kind husband and father. But in this portrait his godly lineaments appeared a conglomeration of features resembling at once the benevolent and bewhiskered Nathaniel Wigglesworth, and the late river pirate, Murrell.

"They was a peddler came along once, and he painted portraits at a dollar apiece or two for a dollar-fifty. So we had Grampa and Gramma painted. I always kind of liked them, but my wife—— Well. You know what wimmen folks are. Along the third time I found Gramp down in

the root-cellar, I kind of decided she didn't care much for having him around. Even though I'd paid out two dollars and a quarter for this elegant gold frame. So I brought him over. I 'lotted he'd ought to pay my subscription maybe three years ahead."

"Sorry, but I can't apply your grandfather on your subscription. I've got more family portraits than I can use right now."

"But maybe—— Say, listen. I donno's grandfather is worth so much. But that frame cost money. S'pose you credit me with the two dollars and a quarter. Then some time you may have your own portrait painted, and that frame will come in mighty handy."

"Heaven forbid!" But Father spoke under his breath. For the would-be subscriber was John Carter, Genteel Undertaker. He had already put a paid advertisement in the *Clarion*. He might be persuaded to enter another. Thus expediency doth make cowards of us all. For months on months Gramp shed a lurid splendor from the office wall.

Twonnet was an enigma in herself. She worshiped Mercy. But as worshipers so often are, she was a weariness to her idol. Mercy needed, and desperately, a capable Martha in her household. But there was little of Martha in Twonnet. Pocahontas, rather, and an untutored Pocahontas at that. Deep in Twonnet, her Indian blood, her gypsy blood, was forever tugging at the leash of love and gratitude that held her to Mercy. She would no more have severed it than she would have severed her own veins. But the pull was there. She fretted under it. And so did Mercy.

"But Twonnet would die for you, daughter."

"Nobody asks her to die for me. But I'd be thankful if she would wash the milkpans just once without leaving soft

soap rims on 'em. Show her how? I've showed her till I can feel my brain crinkle into knots."

"Try her with outdoor work."

Mercy attempted to teach her to milk. The cows, however, viewed Twonnet with alarm and refused to give down their milk. She set her to sweep and clean. Twonnet left the mop-pail where the Captain's tottery old foot would be sure to trip on it. She attacked Jo Vanny's shed with unholy zeal and swept Jo out bodily, coughing and sneezing and speaking strange Sicilian words (words eagerly adopted by the little boys, who joyously collected anathemas as ancient as their collection of arrowheads). She set Twonnet to scalding the wash. Twonnet forgot and left the boiler to its own devices. It was jam-full of Aunty's solidly embroidered best petticoat, the fruit of a year's handiwork. Of course it was scorched to ruin. "And I'd calculated on another five years' wear, anyway, and then I 'lotted on wearing it under my shroud! You hear me, Mercy, no use trying with her. She's upset the cows' stomachs, and she's got the Captain miffed, and who wouldn't be, with every inch of skin knocked off both shins, and she's put Jo Vanny where he froths at the mouth whenever he sees her coming. Does worse with his mouth than froth, too. Let her pump water and bring in firewood and play tag with the little boys. That's all she's good for."

So Twonnet played tag. Incidentally—for she hated the tight, warm house like the wild thing she was—she helped herself to the twigs and branches from the pile of firewood, and by adding armfuls of clean straw she built up a tiny tepee close to the well. In it, save in the bitterest weather, she ate and slept. The little boys were enchanted. They popped in to visit her in season and out of season.

"Let her alone. 'Drive out Nature with a stick, she will come running back,' Mr. Emerson used to say," declared Father consolingly. Mercy sighed with relief. With Twonnet safely in the tepee, she could neither spill nor burn nor break.

The Captain, frail as he was, proved less a source of worry. And Jo Vanny had regained his strength, although he was still pitifully lame. He had regained his appetite too. Now and then, when Mercy observed his activities as a trencherman, a queer shiver ran through her. Oh, well! Never mind. What with the pickerel stored in the ice-covered brook and the squirrels that the little boys so proudly brought in and the venison and the wild turkeys and the vegetables that the subscribers offered, they would fare sumptuously through the winter. By spring, everything would be all right. Everything always worked out all right when spring came again. Anyhow, Father would have been ten times as hurried and anxious and miserable if he had turned away these forlorn waif-children of his. As long as Father had a roof and a kettle of cornmeal mush, it wouldn't be Father if he wasn't eager to share.

Then there was Mr. Lincoln. But at thought of him, Mercy glowed, contentedly. No puzzle in Mr. Lincoln's visits! Solutions, rather. He dropped in almost every day. There was something curious about Mr. Lincoln. He was often grave, sometimes as serious, as depressed, even, as was Father. But he brought always a sense of rest and ease, of tranquil, unchanging comfort. It wasn't just the kind and generous things he did for you, though they were past counting. But the minute he entered the house, you felt his presence. A great sober, gentle presence, who knew all the things that bothered you and harassed you though you did not tell him one word. Who quietly, patiently, put his mighty shoulder to the wheel and lifted, precisely

as he had put his mighty shoulder to their mired-down wagon. Who, understanding everything, never pried, never pestered; but gave forth, gently, silently, a comradeship that picked you up out of your small fractious, worrying day and set you on a high mountain where you could see how tiny, how trifling, were all your frets and worries and how surely you were conquering them.

He would ride up, a gaunt scarecrow on his clumsy, sure-footed Old Tom, looking to outward sight as sullen and dismal as the sullen day itself. He would be clad, as always, in the flapping black coat above trousers that struck high-water-mark on his endless shanks. Sometimes over it he wore the frayed old greatcoat that looked as if it had been soaked in the creek and then dried over a chair-back, as it undoubtedly had been. He would sit down—lop down, to use Aunty's word—in the biggest chair, and overflow it with his sprawling, unbelievable legs and arms, and tilt back his rumpled head with its coarse, rough, black hair ("Injun hair," again to quote Aunty), as if he were too tired, too disheartened, for speech. But don't you believe it. In two minutes he'd be "wrassling" with Adoniram, while Seth and Thomas, mad with excitement, jumped up and down and cheered him on. Then (providing Aunty did not come in and inquire in her mildly scornful tones, was this a civilized house, or had they taken to breaking wild horses here) he would transform himself into all the animals that ever pranced out of the Ark. He would be a terrifying lion, an agile kangaroo, a gigantic serpent, writhing towards its bawling, ecstatic prey. He would be a wild boar, a slim and languishing giraffe. Usually he would wind up, grunting and bubbling (just as it told you in the Thompson's Natural History!) a ship of the desert. The resultant ship-wreck, square in the middle of the Sahara, would leave the survivors hoarse and frenzied.

"What's this board, all inlaid in pearl and ivory and silver?" he asked, after one such bout, as he stood panting by the old Chippendale table.

"That's Father's chess-board."

"I've read about them. But I never laid eyes on one before. Want to show me how to play the game?"

Ensued a triangular riot. The victor then plunged into the envied task, summoned the ranks of ivory and ebony.

"First you fix them like this. Pawns in the front row. Then kings and queens and knights and castles and bishops——"

"Sounds like real folks. Pawns are common folks like you and me. So you put the pawns right in front where they'll get the full shock of battle. H'm'm. Sounds like nowadays, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir. And you fix 'em straight and steady. Kings and queens right where they belong——"

"I see. Kings and queens have to toe the mark like everybody else, eh?"

"Yes, sir. And then you sit down. And you think."

"Here! What's that? *Think!* Why, man alive, thinking is the toughest work anybody can do. Too tough for most of us. Why, lots of people go floundering from the cradle to the grave and never think once."

"But Father says you can't play a good game of chess, 'less you think, hard."

"No. Nor a good game of anything else, I reckon. Not even of lawing. Evening, Mr. Stafford. Here's your son, the precocious young sprout, setting forth the truth that even in chess there is no profit save to the toiling mind. Adam's curse is smeared over everything. Even that chess-board."

"No. The toiling mind must dominate all our world. It ought to dominate our political views too, Mr. Lincoln."

Mr. Lincoln looked amazingly squelched. Then fell a silence. In that dim twilight room you had the queerest feeling that someone else had put a mighty Question. And that Mr. Lincoln had turned aside rather than try to answer.

“In time even that miracle will be wrought.”

But Father was merciless.

“Judging by the deliberations that our best citizens indulge in, I should figure that date as approximating the Millennium.”

Mr. Lincoln actually flinched at that.

“Well. . . . All we can do right now is to hold fast to the camp-meeting hymn,” and he rose aloft like a leisurely Titan. He flung Thomas to his shoulder and began to march and sing,

“*Keep a-inchin’ along,*
Keep a-inchin’ along,
And we’ll all git to Heaven, by and by.”

“Thomas, I brought along a bite or so for my own supper. Suppose Aunty and Mercy will let me stay and eat with you folks?”

Then Thomas and his brothers would depart for the barn, whooping. They would dig into Mr. Lincoln’s saddle-bags and find mysterious parcels. These would not be for Mr. Lincoln’s supper alone. Far from it. There would be a ham, a big, tender, juicy one, not much resembling the scrubby relics that the subscribers brought in. There would be choice tea for Aunty and a big sack of raisins, and maybe, for a grand treat, an orange apiece. Then Mercy would hurry their supper on the table and Father and Mr. Lincoln would eat and talk and talk and eat, and minute by minute you could see them grow rested and reassured. They would throw off the day’s heavy weariness. They

would settle into the collar, as Mr. Lincoln would say, ready for the next long, grinding-hard day. And when the fat whale-oil lamp burned low, Mr. Lincoln would say, with ceremony, "Thomas, may I share your bed-chamber this once more?" And up the ladder-steps they would climb. Little 'Fraid's yellow head bobbing with sleep, and Big 'Fraid spreading out a hand the size of the Hand of Providence, to make sure he wouldn't fall.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHRISTMAS was coming, Seth remarked, but without much conviction. For to proper New England children Christmas was a Papist festival, nothing more. If you were a Puritan father and longed shamefacedly to give your little sons some special happiness you put a shiny new dime and maybe a jack-knife, and a stick of candy under their plates on New Year's morning. But never, never did you give one shred of tribute to Christmas Day. Never.

Thus far these pitiful substitutes for the loveliest day of the year had been eminently satisfactory, for the little boys knew nothing better. But here in this mid-west school they had been thrown with pagan children who spoke of Santa Claus with an assurance which roused longings akin to desperation.

Father listened: then he so far forgot his principles as to tell Aunty what he wanted to do. Aunty nipped his yearnings in the bud.

“Heathen performance as I ever heard tell on. What if the other parents do give their children Christmas gifts, Ephraim is joined to his idols. Let him go.”

“But, Aunty, when you think it over——”

“Don’t think it over. Else you may open the door of your soul to the Devil himself. Hold fast to the beliefs of your fathers. So shall you escape everlasting destruction.”

Father made a stagger at that. But two days before Christmas, little Thomas had a bad attack of croup. It was hard enough to resist little Thomas under any condi-

tions. But when he sat propped up in the wide pineapple bed glittering with goosegrease, smelling to heaven with lard and turpentine, and gasped hour after hour for his little life, small chance of withstanding him.

"Now, Thomas, swallow this. Down it, quick, son!"

Little Thomas turned faintly green, but gulped, obediently.

"Good. Goes down pretty hard, doesn't it?"

"It would go down lots easier"—a gulp—"if I thought maybe we was going to have any Christmas."

That settled Father. It would have settled a Spartan parent.

At twilight he went to the barn, hitched up Button, tossed in the ax, and drove down towards the evergreen grove three miles away. This was an unfrequented road. The nearest house was the Hewitt's, almost a mile away. Old Major Hewitt was past ninety and his gaunt old-maid daughter was close on seventy, and in this raw cold weather they would hardly venture out to spy. But Father crept through the grove with guilty caution and slid behind a clump of trees whenever he imagined that he heard an approaching team. He seized on the first tiny tree in sight, chopped it down, and hustled it under the buffalo robe as if he hid stolen treasure.

It was full dusk when he drove into the barnyard. Jo Vanny hobbled to meet him and put up Button. Father waved him away. Then the old Captain came weaving down the steps.

"Let me tend to that air horse. You go in and git your supper."

"Never mind. I'll put Button up myself."

He drove into the barn, chaise and all. Pity a man couldn't be permitted to put up his own horse, and thus have a chance to slip his stolen goods into the hayloft!

But he had just unhitched Button when he heard the ring of hoofs. And then Mr. Lincoln's voice:

"Never mind, Captain. I'll put up Old Tom myself. Go 'long, Jo Vanny, I don't need any help. Listen, if I want either of you I'll holler."

Father cowered behind a manger.

Into the barn clattered the big roan. After him, stealthy as the First Conspirator, trod Mr. Lincoln. He carried something long and bristling. As he passed Father, a brush of prickling spicy needles swept his cheek.

The devil entered into Father.

"Halt!"

Mr. Lincoln stopped as if he were shot. Father struck a match; the lantern wick flared high. They stood and glared at each other, sheepish as two schoolboys. Under one arm Father still clutched his fat little tree. High in Mr. Lincoln's arms reared another tree: a tall, lean, scrawny tree, but a Christmas tree for all that.

"Why——" Mr. Lincoln actually stammered. "Why —my wife and the boys have gone to Kentucky to her father's for Christmas. I thought you folks wouldn't mind if I——"

"What in the name of common sense——"

The barn-door opened again. Father gasped. He all but dropped the lantern. Aunt Celestia!

Aunty's steel specks were cocked like horrified eyebrows. Her crimped front bristled; her eyes snapped sparks.

"What in Tunket—— John Stafford, what have you been up to? After what I told you——! And you, Mr. Lincoln! I am surprised!"

The men stood limp. Not a sound out of them. But suddenly Father's cringing head lifted high.

"I beg your pardon, Aunt Celesty. But what's that in your apron pocket?"

It was Aunty's turn to gasp.

"None of your business, young man."

But surely the Fiend himself had entered into Father. Lincoln gaped at him awestruck. For he strode forward, seized the apron, and deftly turned the pockets inside out. A long string of fluffy kernels of popcorn; under that a sack of spendthrift store candy. Then a scarlet mitten, half knit; and, supremely incriminating, a great ball of soft rose wool.

"Come now, Aunty! Own up!"

Aunty's shriveled cheeks blazed.

"Nobody ever heard tell of such impudence! Well. If you've got to know, the boys need mittens all round. And I've been aimin' to make Mercy a nuby, and I bought pink, because she likes it. And the popcorn—I heard Thomas telling Seth that on Christmas eve he was going to pretend his bedpost was a tree and trim it up with his string of arrowheads. I don't believe anybody would ever mistake a bedpost for a heathen idol so I thought maybe I'd get them a couple of sticks of candy. And giving it to 'em on the twenty-fifth of December ain't much difference from the twenty-fifth of any other month."

Many Christmases would come for the small Staffords, but never a one so marvelous as this. For Mr. Lincoln unbent abjectly from his grand estate and dressed up as Santa Claus in a buffalo robe and a shrunken red flannel shirt of Father's that strained ominously in the seams and split a foot or so in the back. And Aunty—*Aunty!*—brought a gunny sack and hung it to his shoulders. First she packed it half full of dry corn to make it look gloriously stuffed. But next she tucked in two warm, thick, home-made shirts for the Captain and a scarlet jacket for Twonnet and a woolly muffler for Jo Vanny! to say nothing of mittens

for the small boys and the rose-pink nuby for Mercy and a fine black paddy-soy stock for Father, made from an old silk flounce. Father put in a quarter and a shiny new Barlow knife for each boy. And Mr. Lincoln capped the climax by piling on three pairs of rubber boots—high red-top boots at that!

Even as she crammed in these evil gifts Aunty felt a weak gratitude that Green River could not see her.

“Sorry I don’t favor any Santa Claus I’ve seen.” Mr. Lincoln observed himself sadly in the ancient eagle mirror. “His specifications aren’t on my lines. If I could just take about two feet off my lateral and hook it on to my horizontal——”

“You’ll do for me, just as you are,” croaked Thomas, weak with ecstasy.

Then came Christmas dinner, and it was a lordly feast in truth. For Father had shot a wild turkey, and Mr. Lincoln brought in a chunk of roasted venison, and Mrs. Isaiah Brooker, their nearest neighbor, only two miles away, had struggled through the drifts to bring a vinegar pie and a persimmon pudding, spicy sweet. Even Thomas was brought to the table, goosegrease and all, to have his share.

“Whenever I sit down to a meal as grand as this one,” remarked Mr. Lincoln, “it puts me in mind of the first really grand table I ever stuck my legs under. I was fourteen, I reckon, and a man grown; I was working for Captain Taylor, ferrying on Anderson’s Crick. Never in my life had I known any folks who had all they wanted to eat every day. And ate in style at that. But old Judge Wellin had just married his fourth wife and they were keeping open house and they asked Gene Taylor, my chum, and me, to Sunday dinner.

“There was a white cloth on the table. I didn’t know

why it was there, and I was scared I'd spill things on it, so when nobody was looking I turned back my corner of it so I could eat on the bare boards. Then I saw there was another piece of white cloth, laid right at my place. I didn't know what in the nation to do with that, but I saw that the Squire had one too and he tucked her up under his whiskers tight and firm. So, while I hadn't any whiskers, I decided most likely that was the proper thing. And I anchored her by one corner inside the neck of my shirt. I was as nervous as a colt and so shaky I was scared I wouldn't be able to swallow. Something—that white cloth, maybe—seemed to tie up my neck and choke me. But after I'd once got going I went right on as natural as life. And nobody seemed to notice anything amiss. One thing I do know: my hosts couldn't complain that I had slighted anything. No, sir, I'd put my hand to the plow and I never once turned back. Corn bread, hot biscuit, and waffles with short sweetnin' and long sweetnin' both, and roastin' ears and squirrel pie and ham and gravy and all the trimmings. No, sir, nothing passed me by. Nor me it."

"Did you get real filled up?" Thus Seth, with eager sympathy.

"As near's I ever can fill up. I've got a good deal of cargo space, you know."

"You're considerable longed out," little Thomas reflected. "But you're kind of caved in the middle, aren't you?"

"Some. I got my growth so quick, son, I've never had time to fill out. Fact is, when I was your age, I never knew what it meant to be comfortable. Always cold. Always hungry. And sickness. And the rain coming through the roof and the snow dusting through the cracks and never anything real dry or warm. Mother tried her best, but she was always having the three-day ager, and when you've

got that all you can do is to shiver one day and burn up the next. And Father never seemed to get ahead, for it kept him busy scratching for meal and molasses to keep the meat on our bones. Down on those bottom lands it was always lonesome, too. Woods and swamps and pretty much nothing else. And always seeing so much misery."

Over his face came a gray look: the gray shadow of that childhood, so bleak, so cold, so lonely. The look of one into whose soul loneliness has seeped like the rain through the log chinks till the very tissues of his spirit are sodden within him.

"Mind this, boys. Soon's you fellows grow up and get ahead so you can spare something for other folks, pass along what you've got to children. Old folks like us have learned that hard times don't last forever. But children . . . when a boy is hungry and cold and miserable it seems to him that things never can be different. All that misery makes a mark on him that never wears out. It sinks in. Sinks in to stay."

On his own face you could see the truth of what he spoke: the shadow that had sunk in.

"When I think of it, it sort of explains why I don't get along better. Remember, you boys, I'm banking on you to turn out a sight better than I've done. You've got your chance of a fine education: hold tight to it. Look at me, a poor lumox of a country lawyer. Forty-one years old and never had any real education. Never had any real schooling. Never had a real chance. Used to have an idea I might amount to something, do something for folks. But I've pretty near given up now."

Nobody said anything. After a minute Aunty got up, her bombazine flounces rustling, and went across to Mr. Lincoln and gave him a little pat. When you looked at Aunty's strong bony old hand you'd have thought you'd as

soon be patted by an armadillo. But somehow her touch warmed you through and through.

"Never you mind, Mr. Lincoln. Forty-one is getting along, but it ain't so old, after all. I wouldn't be surprised but you'll do something real useful for folks even yet."

Over Mr. Lincoln's gaunt, tired face came a queer wry grin.

"That's as fine a compliment as any man could wish, Ma'am. I ask your pardon for complaining. Only—when I get to questioning myself, distrusting myself, I slump down so far it takes a team of oxen to haul me out."

"Every real man distrusts himself." This from Father. "Even when he's doing his level best to carry his responsibilities without a whine he knows he is lugging the heavier load of his own nature. Deep in him are strange, rebellious forces. They're built into us, strained into our blood, from generations back. They baffle us and trip us up. They make us doubt everybody. Ourselves, most of all."

"I know that. No man lives to himself, in himself. Curious. Some of us distrust ourselves all the time. Those are the hopeless losers, the barren stalks. Others never distrust themselves. They trudge along, all bulging with assurance because they haven't enough gumption to know better. Still others fight out that battle every day. Courage: despair. Courage: despair. And they are the salt of the earth, the backbone, the wheat. And when their end comes they lie down in the dark. But their faces are turned to the light."

There was a long silence. At last there came a sound from little Thomas. It was not a croupy bark. It was a sigh. A sigh that came from the depths of his small innards. Mr. Lincoln looked across at him. His face broke up into understanding crinkles.

"This isn't what you'd call a lively session, is it,

Thomas? Never mind. We're going to chirk up right now. Seth and Adoniram, you two thought I was so busy eating my dinner that I wasn't checking up on you. But I did. And it's my belief that in ratio to our respective capacities you ate more than I did. Come outdoors and I'll race you down the lane and back. The first one that founders has got to sing a song, cut a caper, and wash the dishes."

Down the lane tore the three. Santa Claus's flannel shirt still blew in crimson fragments from Mr. Lincoln's shoulders. Aunty's purple nuby flapped around his neck. Donny and Seth, despite their brief legs, distanced him without mercy.

"Now for your caper," squawked Thomas, hoarse with delight.

Obediently Mr. Lincoln cut it. It jarred the solid logs on their foundations.

"Now your song——"

Mr. Lincoln stretched himself upward, up and on till his rough black head scraped the ceiling. In a voice that drowned the rising wind without, he lifted an ear-splitting chant.

*"I'll chase the antelope over the plain.
The lion wild, I'll bind with a chain.
And the dear gazelle, with its silvery feet
I'll bring to you for a plaything, sweet——"*

Everybody applauded, determinedly. All but Thomas.

"Don't you like my singing voice, Thomas?"

"I'd ruther watch you wrassle," said the truthful little Thomas.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THEN straight after Christmas came the cold, the terrible prairie cold, that locked their world in a prison of snow and ice and threw away the key. You would not believe that even April could ever find that key. The Stafford family had known just as bitter weather every winter of their lives back in New England. There, when you had trudged for weeks on weeks beneath clouds like gray sodden blankets in a sky like gray iron, some freezing starless night would come a sleet storm. Then you would waken to white magic, to sunlight that blazed on a world all blue and rose and emerald, fir-trees that stood like warriors in diamond mail, and meadows that rolled away at your feet, a sea of glass, mingled with fire. All the hills unrolled a jeweled script, the pages of a mighty book: the pines wrote out their immemorial creed in black, unfaltering characters upon those pages. Below a fair illumined margin, you caught the glitter of the frozen brook. And over all lay light, the dear and lovely light, the light of a deathless wonder that could lift up your heart and carry you as on wings through the black days and weeks to come. The light that was a promise and a covenant, a surety for spring.

But here only the gloom, the cold, the crying wind, the snow that shut you as into impassable walls.

In the darkness that comes before the dawn, Mercy would waken. She didn't jump out of bed at once. It took a minute or so to screw up her courage. Then she sprang out and ran to the fireplace, and jammed in armsful of cobs and splinters and chunks of fat pine. Then she fled back to bed and snuggled against Aunty, as if Aunty were a long

slim, hot soapstone, until the splinters flared up like candles and the chunks began to blaze. Presently she hopped out again with determination and built the kitchen fire and put on the kettle. Of course that was Twonnet's work, but somehow Twonnet was never up on time, and Mercy knew she'd freeze to death if she ran out to the tepee and tried to wake her.

The Captain would have crept willingly from his snug little lean-to, but she hated to let him build fires because he was so trembly and uncertain, and Jo Vanny was still so lame. And the little boys needed to get their sleep out.

Next she dressed in a jiffy and put on the coffee and the bacon and called the little boys. Taught by experience, she kept on calling till the thud of feet and a drowsy whimper assured her that one of them was beginning to wake up. That meant the whole-hearted awaking of the other two.

Then she took a pitcher of hot water to Father. Probably Father had worked half the night on the articles he was writing for Mr. Greeley's paper. Mr. Greeley's payments were moderate but always Providential. Father would pull her bronze-gilt braids and wonder impatiently why she couldn't send Twonnet and save herself so many steps, but he liked all her small services, she knew that. Father usually liked everything she did for him. Then the invariable scramble to get everything on the table at once, and all smoking hot, too.

Right after breakfast came morning prayers, with Thomas kneeling at her side with a face like a seraph, and pinching Seth in unshielded portions meanwhile. Then a scramble to get the boys ready for school in time to ride with Father. For Thomas had lost his spandy new mittens, and Donny had scuffed a hole in one of Mr. Lincoln's elegant Christmas gum boots, and the school-children had teased Seth to fury about his unruly cow-lick, so at the very

last minute, Mercy had to run for the big bottle of sweet-oil and plaster that cow-lick down flat. Of course it bravely rose erect the minute Seth's cap came off.

"Seth, stop wriggling—— *Will* you hold still!"

"Ow, ouch! You pull like sixty! Oo, that oil is dribbling down my ears! And here I washed my neck this very morning! If you aren't careful I'll have to go out to the wash-bench and scrub it all over again!"

"Calamity!" This from Father, dryly. "Travel now, youngsters. I give you one more minute. Thomas Stafford, go wash your hands. Do you hear me? Washed them already? H'm. Look at the water in that basin! Clear as crystal! Move, now."

Then after they were gone the day piled up, piled up, no matter how hard she tried. Milking, with the Captain determined to help. She was lucky if he didn't spill a whole pailful. Baking, for somehow or other she had to bake every day. Six grown-ups and three small boys can work havoc even in a well-stocked pantry. Father and the boys took their lunch-pails, so she need cook a hot noon meal for only five people. But even that took some time, and Aunty was too rheumatic to help much. Then came an hour or more of struggle with Twonnet. Twonnet had flatly declined to go to school and take her sadly rightful place with the primary class. So Mercy was teaching her to add and subtract and to read about the Rat and the Cat in Thomas's discarded primer. Which was, as Mr. Lincoln put it, a land-office job.

Then before you'd believe it the wan and frozen sun had sunk behind gray cloud banks, and the water-pails were all empty, and Jo Vanny had forgotten to split any kindling, and Twonnet had slipped away to her tepee. So Mercy must slide across the gliddery crusted snow and remind her. It would have been easier to chop it herself, but

Father had insisted that Twonnet must do her share. Then in clamored the little boys, an army with banners, and empty to the soles of their copper-toed shoes. A scramble to get supper. After supper she read and dutifully admired Father's new article on "Kansas: A Nation's Glory or a Nation's Shame," for the *Atlantic World*. She heard 'Doniram's spelling, she helped Seth with his arithmetic, she hammered it into Thomas's head that there were twenty-eight states and twenty territories, and the District of Columbia, and No, a territory was not a wild animal, it was a piece of land. How big? W-well, different sizes. Did it have wolves and bears and rattlesnakes and lions on it? My goodness, how should I know? Learn your lesson, and don't ask so many questions. Then 'Doniram brought nuts and apples from the cellar, and Seth and Thomas wrassled over the biggest apple. Thereupon Father sternly summoned them all to evening prayers, and then Thomas choked alarmingly on a hazel-nut, and Father had to desert Jeremiah and stand Thomas on his head and pound him on the back.

Then Father covered the fires, and Mercy set her bread for to-morrow. And then the heavenly still abyss of sleep. And to-morrow was another day.

January crept on leaden feet. February came on the wings of fearful cold that froze the milk before she could carry it indoors, that even drove Twonnet from her tepee o' nights to a blanket before the fireplace. Then, before her astonished eyes, that numbing cold had flown and February lay on the mounded snow, all pale sunlight and folded amethyst shadows. And March shouldered in with angry, screaming winds and sleet that burnt her cheeks and sheathed the roads with pebbles of ice that looked exactly like fever'n'ager pills, so Thomas observed. But March was only a braggart and a boaster. For in a week

the sparkling frozen marsh was a sheet of sparkling water, and Seth and Thomas came to blows over which one had seen the robin first, and the Captain, red spots of eagerness on his parchmenty old cheeks, had coaxed Father to buy a new cherry-red plow, with a sticky gold stripe down the handle. The Captain was set on doing the plowing himself, but his unsteady old hands couldn't guide the horses, his trembly knees doubled up with every step.

"It isn't me that's playing out, it's the plow that's so onery," he explained. He looked up at Father, beseeching, like a frightened old baby.

"Of course it's the plow. I couldn't manage it myself," Father lied gently. Aunty sent the Captain to bed with a mustard plaster and a hot brick.

When Father and the boys were safely away, Mercy made a fine start. But her small hands could not take a good grip, and her slender back set up a rebellious ache. Soon Aunty caught sight of her, and descended on her with violence.

"Mercy Rose Stafford! I am ashamed of you! Drop that plow. This minute. I'd rather run it myself——"

At that moment Twonnet hove in sight. She had romped down to the schoolhouse with the little boys. All her ancestral hatred of the plow flared awake in her darkening eyes. But then she leaped to Mercy's side. She snatched the plow from Mercy's hands and like a furious Ceres she set to work without one word.

When Father came home to supper he gaped at the wide strip of black, rich furrows. Twonnet sat moveless, sullen, under his quick, kind praise. But after supper in the frosty early starlight she crept out to plow again. Under her feet rolled another long black string of woven roots and soil. As she plowed she sang under her breath a queer old

troll of a tune. Nobody had ever heard Twonnet sing before. Perhaps the spring had found a key to Twonnet, too.

Prisoned by that cold, those snow-blocked roads, it would seem that winter must spell endless dreariness. But though they might be isolated for weeks, time fled too swiftly. Whenever the roads were broken there were spelling matches and singing-school at the schoolhouse. There were candy pulls at the Isaiah Brookers' with their houseful of youngsters, only two miles away. Once in a long time came a sleighing party, although Aunty frowned on these as tending towards frivolity. Best of all, there was Mr. Lincoln. Not even the harshest weather could keep him away. The rougher the storm, the more certain was he to appear.

He would come in shivering, blowing on his huge half-frozen hands, his great gray shawl flapping from his enormous shoulders, his lean face ground to the bone by cutting sleet, a great, gaunt, perishing scarecrow. He would make his gentle, awkward compliments to Aunty and ruffle the little boys' silky heads, then settle down, one joint at a time, before the hearth-fire and bask in that deep glowing heat. There he would rest, tired soul and body, hardly speaking, like a creature whose contentment is too deep for words. There was something piteous in his humble, grateful contentment as he stared around the warm, bright, friendly room. Grateful as if he, always so lonely, so forlorn, could never quite believe in this comfort, this happy, every-day affection that reached out to him so eagerly, that made him so generously its own. This New England home, so plain, so bare, so rich with proud, loyal love, opened its doors upon him like a new, gentle, compassionate world.

"Seems to me this is the one place on earth where I ever get honest-to-goodness warm. Warm clear through."

"If you're cold, Mr. Lincoln, I'll go fetch my red blanket."

"I don't need it, Seth. It isn't fires and blankets, it's you folks, I reckon, that melt the frost out of my bones." He leaned back in the big splint rocker, he sighed as from measureless depths of comfort. "When I was along fryin' size, like you, we never did get enough fire to keep warm. First memory I've got is of chopping up pine splinters with ma's chopping knife. They stuck an ax into my hands quick's I could carry it without tipping over.—Reckon my last memory will be chopping splinters, too."

"Didn't you have stoves, Mr. Lincoln? And a nice warm house like ours?"

"Not exactly. First winter we lived in Indiana we had an open-face camp. Know what that is? It's a log cabin with no south wall to it except a fireplace, and it's built a lot like a mud-dauber's nest. All thatched on top with little sticks and brush, and the chinks catted—packed with clay that's mixed with straw. If you've got a good tight cabin, and piles on piles of fuel ready; hardwood back-logs, and chunks of dry hickory, and pine branches, to flare up in a rush; if you've got good solid bunks built against the walls, and feather beds shoulder-high and plenty of bearskins, why you can make out to live and stand even a bitter winter. 'Specially if there's lots of snow that you can bank up around the cabin. But you've got to kind of coil yourself up, 'specially a person that's built in sections like me. And from November to April, you never get warm enough to go slack. When the frost let go we all had to sit in the sun and thaw out like so many glass snakes, else we'd crack off a section or so."

"But it wasn't winter all the time."

"I'd say not. My, Adoniram, you boys have a dull time of it nowadays compared to us. Soon's I could carry a gun,

my dad took me hunting with him. I've brought down wild turkey and deer and even a black bear when I was so little the gun would kick me flat every shot. One time I killed a bear that measured mighty nigh as big as a cow. He clawed me some, but I got him."

A sigh of anguished envy from the little boys.

"Skinned him myself, and cured the skin for my step-ma for a foot-blanket, nights. She was so pleased she packed up what eggs and butter she dared take, and walked seven miles to the settlement and swapped her stuff for a bag of raisins for me and a stick of peppermint candy. First time in my life I'd tasted candy. Yes, we had bee sweetnin' and tree sweetnin', and times when we were real rich, a jug of molasses. But that candy! I can see it yet. It was red and white, barber-pole—I looked at it ten minutes or so before I dared even take a lick. Then I hollered to Sarah, my sister. She came in and she looked till her eyes popped. Then I says, You get the first lick, and after that we took lick about. There's a place in the Bible that tells about the Heavenly gates.—Always seems, when I shut my eyes I can see 'em straight and clear. But they aren't pearl, mind that. They're barber-pole peppermint.

"My step-ma was a mighty smart woman. Thrifty, too. She worked from sun-up till sun-down every day of her life. But she always found time for her garden. Folks said of her, she was the growin'est woman they ever did see. It wasn't much of a garden, maybe, but it meant a lot to her. And to us. Everything she touched would thrive for her. She planted every kind of yarb she could find, and every kind of shrub. Sassafras, poke-berry, camomile, juniper—couldn't tell you the names of all of 'em. Whenever we moved, she'd lug along seeds and cuttings. We had roses, too, and spirea and laylock. 'Course we were poor. Torn down poor. But whenever new settlers came along,

you could depend on my ma to get over to their cabin and take them something for welcome. A pat of butter, say. Or some jerked venison. And always a slip from one of her shrubs, or a handful of garden truck. She'd say there was nothing that would cure homesickness so quick as something you can plant right off and watch it grow.

"But mind you, she was canny, too. She'd hang around and watch to see if they were the kind of folks that owned books, see? Then she'd say, real politely: 'I've got a boy at home that's plumb cracked over books. Maybe it's so you'd let him take a peek into yours some day?' And time and again she'd come home carryin' maybe one book, maybe three or four, and tickled to pieces. For a long while I was too bashful to ask for myself. But my, how I banked on ma asking for me!

"It was ma's doing that I met the two men that counted most to me, most out of all the folks I ever knew, those times. One was an old broken-down school teacher who had settled down in an abandoned cabin right up the hill from Anderson's Ferry. I was working on the ferry then. He lent me all the books he had. I could tell you the names of every one and 'most every word that was in them—and nights he used to lie there on his torn old blanket and talk to me. And when he talked he said something, mind you that. One night I was flattened out on his hearth reading *Plutarch's Lives*, and said he, 'Abe, what's your handle? Picked it out yet?' I didn't get what he meant right away. 'Abe,' says he, 'All this reading you're doing; in the end, what are you doing it for?' And I said, 'Because I want to read every book in the world. I want to know everything I can learn.'

"Well, all right. Good books are good tools,' he said. 'But every good tool has got to have a handle. Look at your ax, yonder. Good metal and sharp, but precious little

good it is if you haven't got a handle to swing it with.' And I began to see daylight, and I said, 'You mean, when I've got my head stuffed full of book-learning how am I going to use it?' and he nodded. And he was right. You listen to me, boys. The man who gives you food, who shelters you from the cold, he's a good friend to you. But the man who gives you a handle to your tools, a grip on what learning you've got, a handle to your own self—he's the grandest friend you've got or ever will have."

This was far past those three yellow heads.

"What is your handle, Mr. Lincoln?"

That melancholy mischief glimmered on his face.

"Right now, your pa is trying to pry the handle of his own supreme ambition into my grip. Maybe he'll succeed. No telling."

"I'm still hoping against hope." Mr. Stafford granted him a grim chuckle. Between the two men flashed a glint of understanding, of exasperated affection, of shrewd mirthful protest; yet that protest held a queer daunted look, as if Mr. Lincoln were abashed, yet not willing to admit it, not even to his own mind.

"Watch me. I'll make a topnotch Abolitionist out of you yet."

Suddenly Mr. Lincoln's mood swerved, darkened.

"Why in the Sam Hill are you so head-set on making an anti-slavery worker out of me? Even if you did convince me, even if you did set me to work, I'd be precious little use. For I'm nobody. I'm a middle-aged back-woods lawyer and a failure at that. Yes, I did go to Congress—once. But the only piece of legislation I tried to put through was my bill to destroy slavery in the District of Columbia, and they threw that out. And now I'm out of politics, out of everything. I'm as good as dead. I've got to keep on with the law, for I've got a family to support. But I'm

nothing but a pack-mule. A drudge. No almighty hopes left in me——”

His big body slumped. His head dropped into his hands. The gesture of his puzzled, tired soul.

“But I do want you. I’ve got to have you. As to being a failure, nonsense! No man is a failure till he lets go. And you’re not the kind that lets go. Never.”

“A fellow can’t help distrusting himself.”

“Not distrusting himself as much as his motives.”

This was a home thrust.

“‘Still harping on my daughter.’” Lincoln flinched, grinned. “There’s one advantage about distrust.—Yes, to be sure, the fellow who hasn’t sufficient faith in himself can never get anywhere. I’ve been up to my neck in that slew a good many times over. But the bull-headed fellow who is so arrogantly certain of himself is even less use. He not only drives himself into the ditch of his blunders, he drags others in with him.”

“W-well. Perhaps.”

“Not perhaps. Absolutely. But I’ll admit that if you feel a failure one day, why the next day you’ve got to make up your mind that you’re the Lord’s Anointed. No matter how much evidence stands against that.” There was a silence.

“Back of all our uncertainties, our miseries, are two causes, I reckon. For one thing, everybody’s lonesome. No escaping that. We’re born lonely. We die as lonely as if we stood on different spheres. The other thing is, we spend our lives hunting for something that we never find. Hunting—yet half the time we don’t know what we’re hunting for.

“A while back I went to a lecture in St. Louis to hear that old friend of yours, Mr. Emerson. Queer looking fellow, so tall, and as lean as a cornstalk; a lean dry head, too.

Looks all bone. Not enough meat on those bones to bait a mouse-trap. But there was something inside that bone, you can bet on that. He was talking about Abolition, about the hopes and plans and schemes that we pull and haul and struggle for, all our lives long. I'd driven down from Grafton and I was dog-tired to start with, and by the time I'd taken that long drive and pried my cutter out of drifts a dozen times or so I was dead with sleep. But I got the gist of what he said. All these hopes and aims and successes, says he, are all very well. And to some men, material success is all they know how to want. But all the riches in the world, all the fame, can not for long content—'the awful Soul that dwells in clay.' That phrase stuck in my mind. It's stuck there ever since. It tells you so much. It answers all your nagging, pestering questions. It makes you see why all your hard work, all your scheming, will stand for nothing when you close up your books.—'The awful Soul that dwells in clay——'"

"Nothing counts," said Father gently, "except the search that we all make. And whether we find that for which we search."

"Whether we've wrestled with our Angel—and thrown him."

Mr. Lincoln stared into the fire. Then up spoke Thomas.

"I never did think it was so very polite of that Angel, to come and make Jacob wrassle with him just when Jacob was all tired out."

"*Thomas!*" Aunty paled with horror.

But Mr. Lincoln took him up.

"It's mostly when we are all tired out that we have to 'wrassle' the hardest, Thomas."

And on his face lay the gray weariness of one who has wrestled with his angel, long years, and knows the conflict still uncertain.

Other days he would come clattering in a different creature, his gaunt face wrinkled with rare fun. He would struggle out of his shawl and his buffalo greatcoat, and career after the little boys like a blood-sweating behemoth, to their screaming delight. Then he would sink to the floor, and let the three youngsters pommel him till he must howl for mercy.

"Let up, boys! Here, no gouging! No ear-chewing, either. Quit that, Seth. You might be one of the gang that jumped my flat-boat 'way back in '28."

"Jumped your flat-boat! Oh, were they bandits? Were they Indians?"

"They were half men and half alligator." This with an apprehensive eye on Aunty. "We were floating our boat down to New Orleans to sell our load of stuff there. Hides and beeswax and cloth my ma and the other women-folks had woven, and hogsheads of sorghum. We tied up along-shore, nights. And one night these alligator-men came slam down on us——"

"Were they real 'gators? Honest, now?"

"If you'd been there you'd have seen. My memory's failing, so I can't be sure. Anyhow, down they came lickety split, seven to our two. And they fought like lions and tigers and 'gators all at once. But we did some fighting ourselves. My mate got a stranglehold on two of 'em and threw them overboard, and I grabbed three and slung them ashore right into the deepest part of the marsh. Then the other two kind of stopped. To get their bearings, I reckon. And while they were sorting themselves out we cut the cable and off we put. We weren't so leisurely either. I had two ugly cuts on my head and a couple of ribs caved in, and my partner had a broken arm and a few teeth knocked out——"

“Oh, oh, I do wish I’d been there!”

At which Aunty exploded.

“Fine ideas to put into their heads! And they spoiling for a fight every day as ‘tis!”

Mr. Lincoln drooped. You might almost say he moulted. Every triumphant feather of him fell to half-mast.

“Yes’m. I reckon that’s so. Well. The upshot was we went on down to New Orleans feeling some set up, because we’d chased off the alligator men seven to two and saved our cargo. We sold that cargo, hide and hair, at the great City market. It was warm and pleasant down there, so we slept out on the levee nights, with our money belts strapped tight and an armful of sugar-cane handy. My, nothing ever tasted finer than that sugar-cane. Not even my peppermint-stick. ’Peared like I’d never get enough of it.

“Coming up-river we got us a free ride on a grand packet. That is it was free, only we worked our passage. My, that packet, all white and grand and graceful like a swan, and the fiddlers playing from morning till night, and the officers all in their fine uniforms, and the ladies in flounces and laces and great flourishing plumed bonnets and little slim white slippers like chips off the new moon!

“And coming up-river, seems as if there’s not a yard of that shore but has its story. Hardly five miles up from Vicksburg was Hilton’s Cave. The mate pointed it out to me himself. Hilton’s gang of river pirates used to hide their booty there. Back in those good old days they’d all go out together and loot the little towns, or maybe rush down on a steamer that was tied up for a night and open fire on her, then strip the purser’s office and clean out the passengers. There was always a bunch of gamblers aboard, so that was a paying job. No, Thomas, no use going down there

now to pick up a few sacks of double-eagles and a bunch of diamonds. That cave has been scraped with a fine-tooth comb over and over.

"Then there's Ghost City. It's an abandoned settlement right below the mouth of the Ohio. When it was running full steam it must have had a couple of hundred citizens, anyway. But a pirate crowd swooped down early one spring afternoon and shot down the whole city, men, women and children, and stripped the place. For all the world like the way the Goths used to strip a helpless Roman city. Left not a wall standing, not a soul alive. They tell it that for one night in the year, St. John's Eve, the city rises from its ashes, and goes about its business just as it always used to do. The laborers take up their tools, the fishermen go to the river with their nets, you can see the farm carts coming in to market. Only you never hear hoofbeats, nor the sound of hammers, nor a human voice. With the first cock-crow they all melt away, and the city's walls and roofs melt with them.

"Then when you come to the river herself she's a very highroad of romance. Take 1833, the year of the great plague, and the story of *The Creole Belle*. She started up-river on September twentieth, her flags flying, her band playing, her decks jammed with a grand, gay crowd. There was the captain, a great dandy in his brass-buttoned blue coat and his tight doeskin breeches and his tall shiny hat and his knee-high kidskin boots as fine as silk; the passengers, rich planters in ruffled shirts and velvet waistcoats, their body-servants following at heel; the gamblers, with their high stocks and their glittering canes, the diamonds and emeralds clustered on their smooth, slippery fingers; the fine, sweet, gracious ladies; all the brightest, gayest world afloat in that late warm summer. But suddenly, before they'd gone halfway up-stream, a queer rumor crept

about. Two of the crew had died within an hour of each other. Died, and their bodies carried ashore by night and thrown into a swamp. . . . The steamer had not even made landing at a settlement so they could have Christian burial. The Fever. . . .

“Then in a breath came panic. The passengers went into a frenzy. They begged to be put ashore, anywhere, anyhow. The captain refused. You can mighty near see it, can’t you?” Lincoln’s eyes grew dark. “Here stands the captain, so haughty and fine, in his grand blue coat and his brass buttons and his face like death. Standing there, both guns in his hands, with the mate so tall and lowering at his elbow. Together they’d hold back that crazy, raging crowd—

“The mate, they say, was along seventeen or so, just a big tow-headed boy. But he was game all right. He’d never seen the face of fear. He laughed in the passengers’ faces when they raved at him and struck him and tried to fight their way ashore. ‘Much good that would do you,’ he jeered at them. ‘You’d be shot down in your tracks before you’d get a mile.’ But the passengers were madmen every one. They went down on their knees, they begged and whined and prayed, they tore off their gold belts and threw them at the captain’s feet. The women snatched off their jewelry, and crammed it into his hands. But neither man gave way.

“Then a handful of ’em seized a yawl, and rowed ashore right close to a little town. The captain and the mate ordered them back. When they refused to come the mate fired on them, and killed two. Well. I reckon the rest of the yawl-load reached the shore alive. But—the word went flying ahead up-river. That the ship was alive with yellow fever, that she was bringing Black Jack upstream with her. A plague-ship. A floating charnel-house. . . .

“So, when she swung around the bend, and headed into

the next landing, they found the sheriff and an armed posse waiting for them, ready to shoot down the first man that tried to land. So they didn't dare so much as to let down their gang-plank. The boat swings back into mid-channel. Upstream she goes, fast as the firemen could rush coal into her. But the word of her coming went faster still.

"Again and again she tried to make a landing. But even when she tried by night to head into the willows where there was no town, up from the thickets would rise armed men and drive her negroes back to the boat. No chance. No hope.

"All the time passengers and crew were dying like flies. The *Creole Belle* went on and on. She passed Memphis with barely half her crew alive. She pushed on, a doomed thing, trying to force her way out of that mesh of terror. No chance.

"The fag-end of the crew couldn't handle her alone. So the captain pressed the passengers into service. He must have had a grim sense of humor, that captain. He picked on Colonel Mountford, the most eminent judge in all Louisiana, a pompous old tom-turkey he was, to be the oiler. He ordered a half-dozen of the brightest ornaments of the Mississippi bar to the stoke-hole. He sent the ladies to be nurses. God knows they were needed, for the fever swept above-decks like a prairie fire.

"And the boat went on. On up-river, food enough aboard, fuel enough. Money enough aboard the *Creole Belle* to buy up the Mississippi basin. But not all that wealth could buy a foothold ashore.

"The mate lived through that voyage to tell the story. His youth saved him. And his pluck. And the way he could laugh. Somehow the people who can laugh at death are usually the ones who win out. I reckon Death sort of sneaks

off when he's laughed at. But that tow-head of his was gray before the year was out.

"Finally they caught on a sandbar, above Cairo. There were just eighteen souls left alive, now. Eight men and ten women. Somehow they made their way ashore by night, crept for miles through the river-woods and escaped. And there, day after day, week after week, its cargo untouched, for its dead still lay on board, hung that boat of death. The country folks would drive down to the Kentucky shore, and stare at it, awestruck. None of them would venture close enough to snatch at the high-piled bales of cotton, the barrels of sugar, the clothes and jewels and treasure, that lay aboard.

"But at last along came a back country farmer, a stodgy fellow, and grinding poor. He had a runt of a farm and a troop of growing boys, and one beautiful slip of a girl, maybe sixteen. Back east his wife's folks had things genteel, and she was forever nagging him because he'd never bought her a stick of good furniture. Not so much as a chair to her name. She taunted him day and night. And she was always dinging it into him that this young daughter hadn't even a looking glass to see her lovely face.

"So he slips out by night, and drives to the shore, then sculls across to the boat. They tell it that his dog wouldn't go with him. That when the creature saw he was steering towards the sandbar he jumped out whining and shivering and swam back to the shore. But the man was game. He brought his skiff alongside, grabbed up his pine-knot and scrambled aboard.

"Can't you see him, picking his way up the steps of the *Creole Belle*? He'd be kind of awkward, you know. His feet were used to furrows, and he'd find it tricky footing to make his way on those narrow polished stairs, then down the long glittering floor of the grand saloon. It

wasn't dark, for his pine-knot lit up the great crystal chandeliers and made them blaze and sparkle. It wasn't close nor damp. For the stateroom doors were all standing open, just as the folks had left them.—And the river wind blew through and shrilled and whistled. I don't know. I'd as lieve had darkness and silence if it was me.

"Well. He went creeping and sliding on till he got to the end of the great gleaming hall. It winds up aft, not in a square, but in a great swan-breasted curve.

"There his torch lit the great mirror, swinging in its gilded pillars. I reckon that mirror had held many a curious picture in its day. The flowing sparkling ladies, the swaggering dandies, the blustering old captain—— Where had all their sparkle and swagger and bluster gone to now?

"Well, as I told you, that farmer had grit. Grit clear through. It was a job for three men, not one, to ship that mirror down and carry it the endless slippery length of the cabin, and lower it into his skiff, and row it ashore. But he did it. By bull strength. He hauled it up the bank and hoisted it into his wagon.

"His horses were as dependable as daylight. But they gave him a tough time right then all right. First they tried to bolt; when he'd finally lashed them down they kept rearing and twisting, and tossing their heads, their white eyeballs rolling. Once the off horse got a square look at that tall shining thing. They galloped a mile or so then, before he could rein them down steady.

"Finally he got home. And his daughter was wild with delight, and that made him forget. But nine days more, and his girl lay dead, his wife and the boys were dying. He died himself, for the fever swept through that house like a great scythe of flame. From that house the plague swept the country. Not a cabin but one lay dead. Nobody has set foot inside that house from that day to this."

"W-where is that cabin?" quavered 'Doniram.

"Right over in Cooper Township. Not twenty miles away."

"Wish I could see it," sighed Seth.

"I'm going to see it some day." This was Mercy, under her breath. Her cheeks flared scarlet, her eyes were wide with wonder, with tragic pity.

"You'll none of you boys live to see it. You'll all freeze to death before spring," thus Aunty, Gorgon-stern, "unless you hiper out and bring in some wood. Here you all sit a-gopherin' and a-gogglin' at these stories while the fires go out right under your noses!"

"My fault, Aunty." Mr. Lincoln picked himself up penitent. "When I get going, it's hard to pull me in. Come along, boys. Let's pile up plenty of wood before Father comes home and ketches us!"

Times like this he would reach for his coat and go and bring up a great heap of logs, and before he finished he'd have a pile of firewood big enough to last a week. After that he would pump all the waterpails full, and go out and help milk. Presently he would remember that he'd brought a haunch of venison and a sack of meal, "Got to pay up just part of the board I'm always sponging off you folks."

And when Father came home in the bitter dusk all his chores would be done and he and Mr. Lincoln could sit by the fire and wrangle and argue to heart's content.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AFTER the weather had moderated, but before the great rains came to choke the roads with mire, they spent more time at the little office in town. Other men dropped in, too, to gossip, to swap stories, to argue. Old Major Hewitt, frail as splintered glass but still peppery and spry at ninety, bundled into knitted vests and nubys and double mittens till he looked, as Seth observed, like the worsted-work cave turned inside out, would totter in, throw off his innumerable wrappings, and scold shrilly at every new thing under the sun. What was the world coming to, hey? Tell me that. Here's the trustees of the Lord's Barn hev up and give permission to a pianny, set right down on the preacher's platform. Blasphemous. Plumb blasphemous. Say it's to lead the singing? Huh. Tell 'em to use a tuning fork and shame the Devil. Here's another man, a mad editor down East, says time's coming we'll build our houses and stores out of steel and glass 'stead of wood and plaster. Just let the fool try it. Steel, eh? His house will be struck down by lightnin' before he can trice up his scaffolds. Down to the Corners, they's been a woman come from Boston says as how men have got to up and give wimmen-folks the vote. Give wimmen the vote, hey! Then set out an' teach the hens to crow!

But nine times out of ten, one burning question held the floor.

"You don't grasp my point of view, Mr. Stafford. For the sake of argument, we will admit that slavery is wrong. Morally, socially, politically wrong. But you look on an institution that is embedded in the life of this nation, and

imagine that you can destroy it with your words and your pamphlets as easily as Joshua knocked down the walls of Jericho."

"If you'd happened to read that chapter with more than half an eye, Mr. Lincoln, you'd have noticed that Joshua and his priests and their trumpets were merely a symbol of the Almighty Power that commanded them."

"W-well. If you feel sure that the Almighty has picked on you as a second Joshua——"

"As far as my limited perceptions would indicate, He has. He lays that obligation on every thinking man. That's why I am in this fight. That's why I mean to stay in it. That's why you ought to be in it yourself. Heart and soul. Body, bones and hymnbook, too. If you think I exaggerate the situation, go down to New Orleans, and take one look at the slave-market. If that doesn't sicken you——"

So the battle would rage. Until finally Mr. Lincoln would say:

"Well. Time will come we'll find a solution. . . . School out, Thomas? What is that new book?"

"My new Reader." Thomas scrambled on Mr. Lincoln's knee, bursting with eager pride.

"You haven't written in it yet?"

"No, sir. What shall I write?"

"See what I wrote one time. In my schoolbook."

Mr. Lincoln reached a long arm to Father's desk and scrawled a couplet.

"Abraham Lincoln, His Book and Pen.

He will be Good—— But God Knows When."

"Why, it makes rhyme!" Thomas bounced, delighted.

"Maybe it makes more than rhyme. Maybe it's a prophecy." Mr. Lincoln rolled a melancholy glimmer at Father. Father tried to look coldly disapproving, then he chuckled.

"I only hope it proves a prophecy. Trot home now, boys. Mercy will be anxious."

Out on the echoing board walk, Seth summed up his opinion. Seth might have been born with both feet in the milkpail, but at times he betrayed a surprising insight.

"Mr. Lincoln doesn't like it because Father prints those little green Nabolitionist pamphlets all the time. But he goes right on turning the press for him just the same."

As the little boys trudged away, Father turned to the table and picked up a letter. A cheap yellow sheet, written in a clumsy disguised hand. He handed it to Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lincoln read it.

"John Stephen Stafford:

BLACK ABOLITIONIST & LAW-BREAKER:

You had better quit your fooling remember what happened to that Yellow Dog Lovejoy we hear tell you was for the Underground other mens presses have been burnt too

You know who we Are"

There was no signature. But in the corner was a roughly drawn skull and crossbones and what looked like a loop of thread, but was meant no doubt for a noose.

"I don't like this, Stafford. Not one of our own citizens would offer you such an insult. But we have a group of drifters here, some of them members of the Clary gang, who have nothing to lose. They wouldn't hesitate at smashing your press, if they took the notion."

"I'm not worried. This is the fourth warning sent to me this winter."

"I don't like it, I tell you." Lincoln's face grew dark.
"Keep your eye cocked for trouble."

"Nonsense. Only a coward writes an anonymous letter. An ignoramus, at that. And look at the spelling."

Mr. Lincoln grunted disapproval.

"Plenty of men who wouldn't know Noah Webster if they met him on the street, can handle a crowbar."

Father grinned at him.

"I showed you that to give you a laugh. Not to bring down a jeremiad on my head."

He threw the letter into the fire. As he passed the window he glanced out.

"Looks as if it was working around to snow again. I—why—who—"

He stood motionless, staring. His face turned a slow angry crimson.

"What's wrong, Stafford?" Mr. Lincoln arose and joined him.

Outside stood a group of three men, laughing and talking. They waved their hands to Father, and beckoned him eagerly.

"What ails you, Stafford? Enemies, hey?"

"Great Scott, no! Old neighbors."

Father jerked open the door and called to them with loud cordiality. They thundered in, shouting greetings. Old Green River neighbors, everyone of them. Doctor Allis, Roger Hill, Truman Crowther. Truman Crowther, stout, jovial, seized Father's shoulders and shook him with vim.

"Here we are, all of us! I'm the only one of the Crowther tribe, so far, but we're all coming west. Lock, stock and barrel. Came out the same way you took, last fall. First by way of the Big Ditch, then overland from Buffalo. Canal still full of floating ice, but a fine trip."

"All your family is coming, you say? Your brother Lemuel? And young Lemuel, too?"

"Everyone of us. The two Lemuels will be along in a couple of weeks. I believe young Lem was wilder to start

west than all the rest of us, put together. But his father made him stay and help settle things up. I have a notion that the Sangamon Country is not the sole attraction for young Lemuel. Before you started west, he seemed to take a considerable shine to that young daughter of yours."

"That so?" Father smiled blandly. "Speaking of the canal being full of ice, has anybody heard about conditions on the Ohio? Is it still frozen over? Or have the packets started?"

"*Queen of the West* starts upstream from St. Louis next Thursday, for Cincinnati."

"To be sure. Providing she gets there whole. Runs a big chance in all this floating ice. Let one sizable cake hit her, and her hull will crumple like tinfoil. Then good-by, boilers, and passengers, too."

"Wonder what the fare is."

"I'm not sure, but I think it's around twenty dollars. She'll charge enough, mind that. But she'll get the cream of the early spring trade."

"I dare say." Father smiled on, bland and serene.

The men hung about idly for some minutes. But at last they drifted away. Mr. Lincoln would have strolled away with them, but Father beckoned him back.

"I've got a favor to ask, Mr. Lincoln. If you can possibly figure on it——"

"Figure on what?" Mr. Lincoln stared at Father's flushed face, his unsteady hands. "You know well enough, Mr. Stafford, if there's any way I can serve you——"

"Well. I'm asking a great deal. But I'm at the end of my rope. Could you lend me as much as—sixty dollars?"

"I'd hope so. The Ferrand case paid up in full last week. A hundred and twenty, cash. You get twice your sixty if you say the word."

"Sixty will be enough." He figured frantically. Twenty

dollars fare on the *Queen of the West*. Ten dollars to take the child by stage from Cincinnati to Yellow Springs. Six dollars by stage from here to St. Louis. Yes, sixty would be plenty. If only he had time to write Horace Mann in advance, so that he would know Mercy was on the way, and would meet her!

His grasp tightened on the handful of gold-pieces which Mr. Lincoln pulled from his gold belt.

"I can't begin to tell you how I appreciate this."

"Drop that. It's an honor. How long will you be away?"

"Only three or four days."

"W-well." Mr. Lincoln scratched his head. "I reckon your paper has got to come out, the same as ever, whether you're here or not. If it doesn't there are a good many folks that will be disappointed. Provoked, too."

"I never thought of that. The issue is all blocked out. But there isn't a soul to set it up. To say nothing of turning the press——"

"Well." Mr. Lincoln looked sheepish. "Court adjourns to-morrow, for a week. I'll have some spare time on my hands. Don't you worry about the paper."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MERCY sat alone in a small tight room in a small tight splint rocker adorned with a small tight patch-work cushion. Everything in that room was small and skimp and compact as a needlebook. There was a narrow single bed, a chest of drawers with a mirror no larger than a man's hand, a diminutive washbowl and pitcher, a miniature glass hand-lamp, and a pile of books. The books alone bore a massive aspect. They included an alarming collection of text-books, a smart new McGuffey's *Fifth Reader* chosen for its Oratorical Selections, a Colburn's *Mental*, her Bible, her diary.

Outside the narrow window, tossing frozen tree-branches drew squares and triangles and did cube roots against a frozen moonlit sky.

Mercy rubbed her eyes and pinched her wrists with firm pink fingers. But it was all real. The marvels of the past five days raced before her eyes, tiny, vivid, clear, like the hurrying mimic rainbows that chased each other over Cyrus's shining glass bowl.

She saw herself that last evening at home, as she stood frying a great panful of mush for supper. Twonnet was scouring the knives, Aunty sat knitting in her fireside chair. The little boys clung to their sister's skirts and poured out the doings of the day.

"And teacher she says to 'Doniram, 'Where is Egypt?'" and he says, 'Northern Africa.' And she says, 'Bound it.' And he tells her, 'Bounded on the north by the Mediterranean, on the east by the Red Sea, on the south by the Nubian Desert——' Then he gets stuck, but he knows he's

got to say something, so he squeaks out, 'And on the west by a row of pyramids——'"

Down on Seth's candid mouth landed a small hard palm. A startled yelp: then the two clinched and went to the floor.

"Boys! Stop that. This minute. Here's Father. What will he say?"

The shindy ceased promptly. But Father did not even look their way. He threw off his coat and took the mush-turner from Mercy's hand.

"Where's Twonnet? Twonnet, please come and finish getting supper. Mercy, I have something to talk over with you."

He drew her into his own room and shut the door.

"Daughter, can you pack up your clothes to-night? You're going to Yellow Springs. To Mr. Mann's college. Right away."

"Why, Father——"

"I've told you always that you were to go to college. Right now comes your opportunity." He laughed, a little harshly. "To-morrow morning, we'll take the stage to St. Louis. Thursday morning, I'll put you on the *Queen of the West*, going to Cincinnati. I'll put you in the Captain's care. At Cincinnati you're to take the northbound stage to Yellow Springs. Tell Mr. Mann that I sent you. I'll send him a letter by you, too."

"But, Father! How can you manage without me? You can't!"

"I'll have to manage, that is all. Now pack whatever you'll need. We must start early."

The picture dimmed, vanished. In its place she saw Aunty stooping above her little trunk to lift out her treasures.

"You shall take my dolman with the weepers and my

cameo tombstone. High time I gave it to you. And my gold beads and your grandmother's ivory fan and her tortoise-shell comb. And I've got a little interest money left. Almost eight dollars. Better take it. You may need some extra fixings."

Past Aunty's stooped black shadow gleamed the glittering blinding sweep of the great ice-strewn river. Regal in white and gold, the great boat swung round the bend. In midstream she slackened, turned slowly, then glided in-shore.

The gangplank fell. Noise, confusion. Then through the tumult came the Captain, punctilious, emblazoned, and bowed to her with ceremony. She felt Father's grip grow tight, then loosen. The Captain took her cold little fingers and led her down the gangplank into the gilt and crystal splendor of the great cabin.

Then came three unbelievable days on the river, her first real journey into the proud world of the day. Another day on the stagecoach. Then Mrs. Mann's sweet and gentle welcome and Mr. Mann's eager hospitality and hurried generous kindnesses. Hurried by reason of that cruel haste that forced him to crowd all his merciless tasks into the pitifully little time that remained to him. . . .

But the pictures raced on each other's heels. "I ought to set down all these things. So I'll never forget." Conscientious and important, she took her diary from the bumptious little trunk, and set to work.

"Yellow Springs, Ohio, March seventh.

"This is the most remarkable day of my life. I am now enrolled as a freshman in Antioch College. I came up alone from St. Louis, aboard the *Queen of the West*. The Captain of the steamboat was very kind to me. His wife is beautiful. She was making the trip with him because it is the

first run of the year and she had to come to bring the boat good luck. She had on an apricot-colored lutestring dress, with three flounces embroidered in green and red velvet cherries. They were life-size, and looked very natural. She had a necklace and earrings of red coral cherries, too. They also looked natural. She uses a great deal of *Balm of a Thousand Flowers*. You can smell it all the way down the cabin. She was very kind to me. There were not many ladies on the boat, but a great many gentlemen. There were 5 young men who were going to Cincinnati on the boat and then to New York on the steam cars. They were always coming to ask if I did not wish to go up on the hurricane deck, and watch the moon. They were very kind to me.

"The second evening, all 5 asked me. They were very polite, especially one of them. He had had too much peach brandy at supper. He kept saying, 'Queen and Huntress, Chaste and Fair,' to me. I think he got it out of a book.

"The moon was very large and bright. You could see away up the river. The floating ice looked black sometimes, and other times it was like little shining ships, all made out of glass and rainbows. I kept thinking how Thomas would like some of them to play with. I fear I am going to be somewhat homesick for Thomas.

"Away up the river was something long and slim and black. It looked like a log. Only it went straight and even across the river, and soon we saw it was not a log. It was a long black rowboat. There were people in it. I counted seven, and I think there were two more, huddled in the bottom of the boat. Only one man was rowing, so it went very slow, and the ice-cakes kept bumping it.

"Pretty soon the *Queen of the West* turned inshore to make her channel. She came so close, we could see the people, and they looked like negroes, except for the oarsman. He was a young man. He was tall and dark and had

no cap on and no coat, but he had a strip of white cloth tied across his forehead. The Captain came along and I said, Who are those people, and are they not reckless to try to cross the river through the ice? And the Captain laughed and said 'I would take a few risks myself, if this was my one chance of escaping slavery.' Then the peach-brandy young man said, 'By Jove, they are runaway niggers, let's take a pot shot at them!' And he jerked out a very handsome pearl-handled revolver and pointed it right at them. I felt very vexed at that, and threw up my hand and struck his pistol arm. I did not mean to strike so hard, but I guess the Davenport temper must have possessed me, for he yelled like sixty and dropped the revolver.

"However, it was just as well, for the revolver was cocked, and when it struck the deck it went off like a cannon. And the Captain rushed at him, and called him a perfectly dreadful name, and said, You drunken fool, I have a mind to throw you overboard. What do you mean, pulling a gun and ladies present? Then the young man acted very saucy, and the Captain took him by his coat-collar, and dragged him down the stairs to the cabin. I thought it was then time that I went down to the Captain's wife, so I did so, but just as I got to the cabin door the young man lost his temper and struck the Captain right in the eye, and then the Captain jumped on him, and shook him till he flapped and threw him across the cabin and the young man went bang into the grand piano. All the ladies present jumped up and screamed and started to faint, and the fiddlers stopped and started to run, fiddles and all, and for a few minutes it was quite exciting. I hope this will be a lesson to the young man not to drink so much brandy after dinner. Anyway, I am glad I kept him from firing on the negroes, for if Father is an Abolitionist, I am one myself. Besides, he might have hit the white boy who was rowing them.

"Aunt Celestia lent me all her best things except her hoops. I knew she could not spare them, so I did not ask for them. But I felt terribly to have only my old set which is absolutely ruined ever since Seth jumped off the shed with them trying to play parachute and broke all the steels. But early the morning we started I took Adoniram and the wire shears and we climbed up and got a whole armful of grape-vine off the barn. I was afraid it was so frozen it would break, but the sap was running so it was all right. Then I took my tucked petticoat and ran the vine into the tucks, and it looks as well as the steel ones, only you have to be careful how you sit down. Adoniram is a great comfort, now he is growing up.

"I have filled up all my space and have no room for Spiritual Meditation only will say that the College will have visiting ministers every Sabbath, and I presume they will set before us their most uplifting doctrines.

"P.S. There was a new student at the dining-hall tonight. He is very tall and he had an ugly dark bruise across his forehead. We had scrapple for supper, and the student waiters kept hanging around him and filling his plate till I thought he would founder. He is very genteel in manner. He looks more like Henry Esmond than Lemuel Crowther could ever look in 1,000,000 years.

"I wish I could see Father tonight. I am afraid I will be more homesick for him than I am for Thomas."

Outside the dormitory window the moon hung chill and wan above the empty fields. Miles away, to the west, it lighted past other empty fields, on and on. It poured a thin and fitful light into Father's little uncurtained study. Adoniram, pursued by the threat of a lonesome streak, lay on the cot with Joseph's Coat pulled over his slumbering head. Under his dim lamp, Father sat and toiled over a closely written page, an article for *The Atlantic World*.

If the editor liked it, he might get as much as ten dollars for it. In that case, thank Heaven, he could pay Mr. Lincoln five dollars on his loan, at once.

It was not easy to write, however, for his mind kept crowding the article aside, thrusting before him the one passionate tender question, was it well with his child? Was she safe with his friends to-night, and contented and happy?

"If only she enjoys the school, if only she does well there, I can manage without her," he told himself.

But the loneliness for her was tearing him to pieces. Oh, he could stand that. At least, he had saved her from a possible romance with that large oaf of a Lemuel Crowther.

Down in the depths of him he knew perfectly well that he could not hold Mercy forever. And she had her right to womanhood. But not now. She was so little, so innocent, so utterly a child. She needed a father, not a lover. When she grew older, say twenty-five. That would be quite early enough. By that time, she would have had time to meet men who were more nearly her equals. Not that any man could ever be good enough for his girl. But Lemuel G. Crowther, the great worshipful booby——Never!

He looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. He took the key from his chain, wound it slowly. Then for a few minutes he sat, motionless.

Clouds passed over the moon, shadowing the world to darkness. Swiftly they passed: the room was again illumined by that chill and lonely light.

Father put out his hand. He did not put it out to touch 'Doniram. Instead, his fingers stroked a small warm sleepy bundle. A bundle of yellow flannel. From one end, there depended a tiny red scalplock. From the other, dangled a pair of bright red flatiron feet.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MERCY had been a college woman for five days. It felt like five years, she reflected, with a certain complacence. For in that time, she told herself, she had settled into the groove of her classes, she had thrown off her besieging homesickness, she had made a brand-new intimate friend, Deborah Sherwin. Deborah, sturdy, wholesome, sweet, with a lisp that awoke aching memories of little Thomas and freckles that stirred wild longings for Adoniram, had set herself to the pleasing task of instructing the stranger upon the world of Antioch, with all possible speed.

“This isn’t just a college, Mercy Rose. It’s a place where all sorts of folks come, whenever they think they have something to say. And they say it. I figure there’s maybe a hundred kinds of preachers been here, all trying to convert us to their notions. To begin with there are all the regular religions you ever heard tell of. But that isn’t a drop in the bucket.

“There are the men who think it is sinful to get their hair cut, and those that run around without any socks, no matter what awful chilblains they get, and the Hook-and-Eyers who won’t wear buttons, and the Seamless Ones, who cut their clothes out of double-wove sheeting so’s it won’t have to be sewed anywhere. Goodness, you can’t begin to count them.”

Deborah spoke truth. In the early fifties the whole country seethed with the ferment of a thousand agitations and reforms. Cult after cult sprang up, so many impassioned little mushrooms, sprouting overnight in that hot teeming soil of bitterness and disunion. Millerite, Grahamite,

Phrenologist, Communist, a swarming host, known afar off by their intolerable deal of beard and their plentiful lack of collar, stormed Antioch's gates. And every man of them gayly quartered down on the struggling little college and its patient Head, naïvely sure of broad fellowship, unflinching sympathy.

“Sounds like the Apostle.”

“What Apostle? Goodness, we've had eight kinds of Apostles, only this spring.”

“Our Apostle. The one with the dishpan. And the long hair.”

“They all have long hair. Then there are the States' Righters. Not so many of them, but they stomp and holler till you're plumb deaf. Mr. Mann doesn't believe as they do, but he says, Let them talk, for a college must be an open forum.

“And the Abolitionists. They don't talk so much. They work. There's a string of Underground stations all the way across Ohio from Cincinnati to Cleveland, and the conductors stop here on their way back. They talk, too. But mostly they're too tired to say much. I think the Abolitionists are elegant. Mr. Phillips came out from Boston last year 'purpose to address us. He wore the handsomest waistcoat I ever saw in all my born days. Black velvet, with gold acorns on it. He's almost as stylish as Mr. Mann himself. Wait till you meet Mr. Mann on the campus, and he bows to you. You'll feel like Queen Victoria.”

“He has. And I did.”

“Some of our students are working on the Underground right now. 'Specially one new boy, who only came a week or so ago. His name is Richard Harrison. He is the most stuck-up thing you ever laid eyes on. His folks used to be the grandest folks in Boston, they say, but they lost most of their money and now they're all dead, and he has a

guardian back east till he's twenty-one. The guardian is very old and set in his ways, and he thinks the Underground road is the sure path to perdition. And Richard has no money, except what this old man gives him. Nowadays, since the boy has taken up with the Abolitionists, the old fellow won't give him a copper. So he came here to work his way through Antioch, with Mr. Mann giving him what help he can. Whenever the Underground wants him they send him word and he drives for them by night. Sometimes he takes a load all the way from the Ohio shore clear across the state and lands the negroes at the Lake where there's somebody waiting to take them on as stowaways. He even rows across the Ohio and fetches them from the other side. Right through floating ice, mind that. They say he isn't afraid of the face o' clay."

Before Mercy's eyes flowed that moonlit icy river, the narrow black row-boat, the dark huddled faces. Then the white face of the oarsman, the white bandage across his forehead.

"I'll point him out to you. He comes to our geometry class whenever he's here. The boys are all crazy about him. They think he's a hero. But he's too offish for us girls. He won't come to our taffy pulls even if he's especially invited. Didn't I write him an invitation to the last one my own self and on my pink paper!"

Mercy sat staid and prim in the geometry class. Serenely she realized that she looked very well indeed. Her slippers were especially gratifying. They were old, but freshly blacked, and Aunty's wide grosgrain ties gave them a pleasing touch of elegance. She was drawing demure triangles in her Colburn's *Mental*, when Deborah's fingers nipped her arm.

"Mind what I told you about Richard Harrison? Here he comes large as life. Isn't he genteel-looking? Or would

be if he wasn't so hulking big. Stuck-up thing. Look at the straps on his trouserth."

Mercy looked up. The boy who was coming down the aisle was certainly big enough. A slim young Colossus in strapped nankeen pantaloons, tight as a glove, and a blue jacket, from which his enormous wrists sprouted, pathetic, unbelievable. His black hair made a heavy glittering cap above his dark face. His eyes, dark, heavy-lidded, yet keen as a hawk's, looked at her, past her, back to her again. He would have been more than genteel, she thought, he would have been handsome, if it were not for the broad livid scar across his forehead.

The boy had stopped short now. He was not just glancing her way. He was staring at her. His hooded eyes widened. Then the red flared up into his face. He strode on past her.

As the two went staidly down the corridor, Deborah giggled.

"My sakes alive! How he gaped at you! Have you ever seen him before?"

"Why, no. B-but——"

Mercy's voice died in her throat. The boy had stopped at the west door. He was waiting for them. He was now all but purple with embarrassment, but he had something to say, and he intended to say it, though the heavens fell.

"Miss Sherwin, will you please introduce me? I wish to speak to this lady."

Mercy dropped a hasty curtsey.

"I think I have a lost article—— I mean, you lent it to me—— If I may explain——"

He was staring at her feet, now. Thank goodness, she had on her trim slippers with the wide bows.

But the boy was not admiring them. Instead, he was kneeling beside her.

"Will you allow me?"

Her own glance fell. Over her rolled a tide of horror. Those treacherous slipper bows! Oh, if Aunty had only made them of her second-best silk and not of the third-best! For one ribbon had broken like a cobweb. Outrageous slattern! She looked miserably at the treacherous gaud. Oh, would the kind earth please, please open and swallow her up?

The boy bent before her. He knotted the malicious ribbons: with fiendish trickery, they frayed and tore again. He choked out a mumbled word.

“Please don’t trouble,” Mercy gasped out, “I’ve got some other strings——”

He straightened up, brushed the sweat from his blazing face. His dignity was overpowering.

“You do not recall me to mind, Miss Stafford. But I know you. If you will permit me a few moments under the big sycamore at the north end of the Glen at maybe four o’clock this afternoon——”

“LAWS AND REGULATIONS OF ANTIOCH COLLEGE

(From the Antioch Catalogue, 1851)

Regulation No. 27

“In order to give the respective sexes equal opportunities of visiting the Glen and enjoying its shades and its waters, they will have the privilege to do so on Alternate Days,—that is, on Wednesday, the first day of each Term, the Young Gentlemen may visit it. On Thursday, the Young Ladies, and so on, alternating from day to day, through the Term.

“HOWEVER: Neither Sex will be allowed to encroach upon the Day allotted to the Other Sex.”

—But why such Draconian rules, if not to be forgotten?

Spring came slowly down the Glen. The catkins were so many tiny velvet fingers, yet on them still lay a silver powdering of frost. Underfoot the turf lay wet and cold and ice-flecked, but overhead danced a gleam of green in the swelling buds. Past them, for all the piercing chill, the sky shone blue as a bowlful of bluest sea.

Mercy had not spoken. She did not need to speak.

“You don’t know me. But I knew you the minute I saw you. You kept your fingers on that cut. You took the ribbon off your neck, so your father could make a tourniquet of it.” He stopped, trembling.

“I—I’ve seen you another time, too. Not a week ago. You had on this same blue dress, and this cape. You stood right under the torches on the hurricane deck. I could see you just as clear. And you knocked the gun out of that fool’s hand when he started to fire on us——”

Mercy sat in her splint rocker, close to the smoky airtight stove. Snuggled down in the deep feather-bed Deborah slept, had slept for hours. But Mercy’s eyes were gray fires. She gripped her diary with one icy little hand, her tall quill pen with the other.

“He says he has known me always. First, you think his eyes are black but they are not. They are very dark gray like father’s, but his eyelashes are so black you think his eyes are, too. Deborah says he is too hulking big. Much she knows about it. He is tall and splendid and he looks like Hektor in Aunty’s engraving of the Fall of Troy, only sometimes he more resembles Henry Esmond, and when he gets excited he is precisely like Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. On Page 346, when he comes to save her from the Maniac.

"When we came home he had to leave me at the campus gate, because it is not considered seemly for boys to walk with girls, and anyway there is always somebody snooping. And he pretended he had dropped a paper out of his notebook, and had to stoop to pick it up, and as he did so he kissed the back of my hand. At least he tried to, but he brushed against my undersleeve instead. It was one of the Mechlin undersleeves Aunty made me out of the lace on Grandmother's wedding bonnet.

"His eyebrows are very black and thick, and there is a dent in one of them. I presume he properly fell off the woodshed when he was a little boy. Like Seth did the time he broke my hoopskirt. I wish I had known him when he was a little boy. He does not laugh much, except with his eyes. He said he had something of mine, to give back to me. I presume it was my engagement ring that Lemuel bought me from the postoffice store for \$1.50. But we both forgot about it.

"When we got back, I found a letter from Lemuel. But I have not had time to open it."

(That statement was erroneous. Instead of opening Lemuel's letter at once she had yielded to panic and jammed it under her shoe-box in the lower drawer.)

"I suppose I should open it and reply to it at once. Poor Lemuel, he has given me his heart's true devotion. But I cannot love him as he deserves to be loved. Not ever again. I do not know how I can break the news to him. It is a dreadful thing, to realize you can no longer love the man to whom you were thinking about being betrothed. I hope Lemuel does not go into a Decline. If he should die of grief, I would never get over it.

"We did not have any visiting minister Sunday, so I have not any Spiritual Meditations to write about."

You woke with the first dim gray of the morning. Under the misty sky the world lay hushed. Only an inquiring robin lifted a vague far note. The night was flowing away so smoothly, so slowly, a dim river that turned from black to gray, from gray to silver. Down that river the wind came drifting and stirred the willows and made them whisper. Then it faltered and was still. The stars flared white as burning paper, against that paling sky.

Then up the east came the trumpeters, file on gleaming file. They blew their reveille in notes of scarlet and gold and mounting blinding flame. And as the new day came marching up the sky you laughed at it softly. For how arrogant was this day, to dream that it could hold more of magic, more of glory, than yesterday had held, than to-morrow would fling down before you!

"Here's your blue ribbon, Mercy, what's left of it. And your ring. Tell me, who gave you that ring? Your father?"

Mercy looked up with a start. A quick pulse leaped in her soft throat. Richard looked down on her. He asked nothing more of this world than the chance to kneel down and kiss that little leaping pulse till it was quieted beneath his lips.

"Come on, Mercy. Tell me."

"A—friend. Back east."

"Are you promised to marry him?"

"No. Not exactly."

"How much are you promised, then?"

"Well, I told him I'd think it over."

"Was that all? Cross your heart?"

"Y—yes."

"All right. I'll do your thinking for you after this. Forget him."

"But I ought to write to him, and explain."

"Explain what? Just tell him that—that—" Then that front of Jove faded into nothingness. There remained, not a frowning Splendor, but a terror-stricken small boy. "T-tell him that you're th-thinking about somebody else. That's all."

Mercy tripped sedately down the stairs to early chapel. This sedateness was no easy achievement. For her feet were dancing, her eyes were dancing, her heart was dancing in her breast.

Richard was standing at the door. Richard's glance was casual, unconcerned. Between the two there leaped a flash of living flame.

Then as they stood together, before they could speak one word, there came to them President Mann. Quiet, urbane, he laid his hand on Richard's arm.

"A messenger has come for you, Richard. He says for you to go on horseback to the Armistead farm and drive some—some friends to Cleveland. You are to start at once."

Richard bowed respectfully. Then, as President Mann turned away he spoke under his breath.

"Back by Monday. Maybe sooner. You know why I'm going." His voice fell to a whisper. "I'll be thinking about you every minute I'm gone. I'll be thinking about you—forever. Good-by."

She stared after him as he strode away. She knew that he was going straight into danger. She knew that she should be dismayed, afraid. But the diamond morning still shone around her, her joy beat out its rush of ecstasy.

At the chapel door stood the table on which the mail for the students was placed. Another letter for her! Could this be from Lemuel, too?

This letter was not from Lemuel. It was a large ruled sheet, laboriously printed by Seth's chubby hand. Seth, her

precious little boggler of a brother! She tore it open. Seth might be the family blunderer; but no more loyal little spirit ever clumped in copper-toed shoes.

“Dere Mercy I guess father would lick me if he knew I told you because he said I am not going to tell Mercy the press & offis got burnt and worry her it was a mask mob done it they says they would get father too but they didnt Ant Celesty is sick abed Twonnet tries to cook Jo Vanny cut his leg open with the ax the Captn has roomatism he cant even hobbel no more at present from your loving brother

SETH HUNTINGDON STAFFORD.”

For a moment Mercy held the letter in her hand staring down at it: then she fled up the stairs. One hour more and the southbound stage would leave Yellow Springs for Cincinnati. If she made that stage she could take the next steamboat for St. Louis. If she did not reach Cincinnati in time she would have to wait seven days, seven eternities for the next boat that would take her home. Oh, if she could only make it! She must see Father this minute, she must know whether Seth had told her all the truth. Was Father hurt? Was Seth trying to break cruel news, yet break it gently?

Into her trunk she hurled books, clothing, trinkets. Her Colburn's *Mental* was jammed in last of all. Into its pages she thrust a handful of letters. Then away she fled to catch the stagecoach for Cincinnati.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE living-room was a trifle crowded. Mercy, still in her calash and her best alpaca, sat in her father's arms. Over the two of them surged a torrent of little boys. Aunty, wrapped in Joseph's Coat, lay on the sofa. Twonnet hung about, going through the motions of cleaning the hearth, but her eyes never turned from her darling, who had been lost and now was found. The Captain had crept in from his snug fire-lit little lean-to. Jo Vanny gloated from the doorway. And in the chimney-corner sat Mr. Lincoln, taller, lanker, more soberly kind than ever before.

Mercy took a fresh grip around Father's neck. She felt herself a queen surrounded by her subjects. All her subjects but one.

“Tell me about it, Father. Quick!”

“There's not much to tell. The mob was masked. Most of them were drunk. The Clary gang was back of it all, I don't doubt. They didn't attack the office till midnight. They all knew that I was sleeping there that night, for it rained so hard, I did not try to go home. What they didn't know was that Mr. Lincoln had stopped in and had stayed the night with me. He was sleeping, or trying to, all coiled up on the table in his big shawl. He'd made me take the lounge myself.”

“And I was enough better off, too. That table is more than six feet and the cot only about five. I only had to double my legs once.” Mr. Lincoln smiled wryly.

“It's fortunate for me that you were there. Legs and all. Mr. Lincoln saved the day, as well as my life, Mercy. When the mob came tearing up and started to break in the

door he grabbed the man with the maul, threw the maul back to me, and then slung the fellow out in the road. He lit in a mudhole. I dare say he's there yet. Then he set to work on the next two men with that maul. They were so astonished, they fell back for a minute. That gave us time to bolt the door and drag the press against it. Then Mr. Lincoln gave me his shotgun. By sheer luck he had brought it along and it was loaded and ready for business. And he pulled out his pistol and began shooting through the window. He grazed two, may three. I heard them yelling and cursing as they ran. That sobered the mob. They drew off and I thought they were clearing out.

"But Mr. Lincoln knew better. He jerked me to the back window. The rest of the crowd had slipped around and set a keg of turpentine against the back door. Somebody tossed in a lighted splinter. As it flared up and gave us a good aim Mr. Lincoln and I handed them a regular broadside. I don't believe we killed anybody, but we certainly broke their courage. They ran like kildeer. Of course we had to run, too, for the back wall of the office was smoking. But the wood was too wet to burn, so it did small damage. We found a bucket of tar in the yard. Easy to guess what they had planned to do with it."

Fury poured through Mercy's veins. She clutched him tighter.

"You never saw such floods of smoke, though. We were blinded, smothered. And the front door was barricaded, so we had no time to try for that. So we scrambled through a window. You may thank Mr. Lincoln for that escape, too."

"Finish your story, Mr. Stafford. I'm in your debt quite some, remember. Mind how I stuck, halfway through? Your father had to scrunch me through as if I was a pig stuck under a gate. Scraped me considerable, 'specially my knees and elbows."

"Well, there'd be one less press and one less Abolitionist if you hadn't stayed that night."

"Fortunate coincidence my being there, I reckon."

Mercy looked at Mr. Lincoln, hard. He gazed past her at the wall. His face was childlike and bland. Much too bland.

"Going to repair the office, Mr. Stafford, and go right on?"

"What else would I do? Think I'd lie down and quit because a parcel of drunken fools tried to burn me out?"

"Hardly. But local opinion isn't altogether with you. Of course our solid citizens have all stopped in and assured you that they regret this performance. But they're shedding crocodile tears, Mr. Stafford. Down inside they're saying, 'Well! What else could he expect?'"

"Local opinion be——" Father swallowed hard. "I know well enough what this town is saying. 'Stafford means well but he's no better than an agitator——' They're right, at that. I am an agitator. I mean to keep on being an agitator till the last horn blows. Wait for the ballot to sweep out slavery if you choose. You may as well start your sweeping with Twonnet's turkey wing."

"I don't figure on sweeping out slavery—yet. But I do want to hold it down inside its present limits. If we can keep it within its boundaries of to-day it will in time become extinct."

"Extinct? Yes, at the identical time that this nation itself becomes extinct——!"

"John, Mercy has had a hard journey. Let us have worship, so she can go to bed."

"You're right, Aunty." Father motioned to Adoniram. "Bring the Bible, son. Now whose turn is it to read the chapter?"

"Mine!"

“ ‘Tis not! You read the chapter last night!”

Little Thomas scorned to argue. He made a flying leap for Seth. Seth was ready for him. With one accord they clinched and went to the floor.

“Boys! Stop it. Of all the outlandish——”

“It’s Thomas’s turn.” Adoniram separated the combatants with a firm impartial hand. “Seth read last night. All about the lazy fig tree that didn’t have any figs on it.”

“Thomas, then. Let go his hair, Seth. Sit up and behave, both of you, or I’ll give the Bible to Adoniram. Do you wish to choose your chapter, Thomas? Or will you open the Bible at random, and read whatever Scripture your hand falls upon?”

“I want to take a chance, please, Thir.” Thomas’s eyes sparkled. This was a rare privilege. His fat paw hovered anxiously over the Book. Finally, portentously, Thomas opened to a certain page.

“It’s only about building a house,” he said finally, a bit crest-fallen.

“The house that lummox built on the sand? Any fool would know better than that,” Adoniram snorted.

“No. It’s about a house that’s divided——”

His round face sobered. The firelight shone like sunshine on his yellow head. His small voice rang out, serious and sweet.

“Every kingdom divided against itself shall be brought to desolation. And every city or house divided against itself shall not stand. . . .”

“What’s all that, Thomas?” Mr. Lincoln looked up sharply. His gaunt head reared, his deep-set eyes began to shine.

Obediently Thomas read again.

When he had finished, there was a curious silence.

“Much obliged, son,” Mr. Lincoln spoke at last. On his

dark face shone a queer deep satisfaction. "Glad you happened on that chapter to-night. Curious. Seems to me as if I'd been hunting for that identical verse my whole life long. Curious. . . ."

Mercy took Thomas to bed with her that night. She had been away from him just two weeks. But she could not get enough of him, his warm little body, his clinging arms, his sleepy voice against her cheek.

"That was a nice chapter, Thomas. I'm glad it pleased Mr. Lincoln, too."

Thomas reflected.

"Father thinks Mr. Lincoln is the smartest man in town. But I don't think he's so awful bright. He said he'd been looking for that text all his life. Yet here it was right in the Bible, all the time."

Mercy hung up her calash, took her keys from her handbag, pounced on her little trunk and searched it by inches. She shook every garment, she even hunted through the chintz trunk lining. Finally she sat down by the fire, a rosy image of despair. The soft light shone on her, lighting dark gold sparks in her thick braids and warming her cheeks to crimson. She reached for her diary and her pencil.

"Maybe if I write things down in my diary," she began, "it will help me remember where I could have put Lemuel G. Crowther's pestiferous old letter. But I'm almost sure I left it at Antioch. I shall write the College to-morrow and ask if they won't please find it and send it on to me. Though ten to one it has been thrown away or burned.

"I never did behave like such a Lunkhead. If I'd had any sense, I'd have read that letter when it first came. But quick's I laid eyes on it, I felt sort of panicky. To be sure, I am not absolutely promised to Lemuel. I told him I

would think about it. But if I hadn't been such a greedy pig about wanting his old ring I would not feel so scared. Nor so cheap, either.

"If Richard writes to me the minute he gets back from taking those runaways north, his letter ought to start from Antioch Tuesday. Then it will come down from Cincinnati on the first packet. If the boat is on time, I should have the letter by next Saturday. I hope it will not be sent by railroad, it takes so much longer. The boat is safer, too.

"Richard sneezed twice when he was saying good-by. It may be just the way Seth sneezes when anything exciting happens. But I wish I had told him to be sure and take dry socks along.

"When I think how poor Father spent all those 60 dollars in sending me to college for just these two weeks, I simply ache. But if he had not sent me I would never have met Richard. And if I thought I was never going to meet him, I'd lie down and pass away. This minute.

"Seems to me I can never leave Father again. It is too dangerous. Just let that mob try again when I'm around.

"Mr. Lincoln acts so innocent, but I can see right through him. He'd heard a rumor that the mob might come. That's why he stayed all night. A-purpose to take care of Father. That's why he brought his gun, all loaded with buckshot, and his pistol, too. Coincidence, nothing.

"... I don't see how I am going to manage without him. Perhaps he will come by fall. But this is only spring. I can't wait. It's just as if I had a nuby wrapped around my head and couldn't breathe.

"Anyhow, Father couldn't spare me, no matter if I did want to go back to Antioch. Repairing the office will cost maybe as much as fifteen dollars. And what with Aunty so feeble, and Jo Vanny all banged up, and poor Captain so lame, and the garden not half started!

“And I don’t believe the little boys have had one real scrub since I went away. Thomas’s finger-nails are scandalous, and Seth’s cow-lick stands straight up, though I have poured buckets and barrels of oil on it for years and years and it was beginning to flatten down. And the house looks as if the barn had fallen on it. No. I’ve got to stay right here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*The glories of our Blood and State
Are Shadows, not substantial Things.
There is no Armor against Fate.
Death lays his icy Hand on Kings.
Scepter and Crown
Must tumble down,
And in the Dust be equal made
With the poor crooked Scythe and Spade.”*

“**I** DON’T like it so awful much,” quavered poor Adoniram.

“What if you don’t?” thus Aunty, sternly. “It’s elegant poetry. It wouldn’t be in *The Wreath of Poesy* if it wasn’t. And long’s you’ve got to speak a piece on Friday you may as well take this one and be done with it.”

Adoniram’s chin wabbled. Speaking a piece, right out loud, before the whole school, was a serious matter. For Thomas, speaking pieces was all in the day’s work. He memorized like a shot, he hopped up on the platform like a plump, complacent robin and chirped out *The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck* or *Marco Bozzaris*, without turning a yellow hair. Seth, too, viewed this public duty without dismay. True, Seth always bogged and stumbled, but the class laughed at him admiringly, which sent him to his seat convinced that he was a master of oratory. But for Adoniram, Friday afternoon spelled linked torture long drawn out.

“I’d ruther sweep the whole schoolhouse. Scrub it, too,” he told Mercy.

Mercy patted his head absently, her eyes on the road.

Father would be back from town before long. The mail stage was due to-day. If Richard had written the Saturday before—if he had sent the letter to Cincinnati, in time for the west-bound packet—

“Oh, never mind, Donny. You’ll speak it all right.”

Donny’s eyes filled.

“I want to sit in your lap,” he sniffled. He heaved up his solid little chunk, and planted himself on her knee.

Mercy groaned aloud.

“Donny, you feel like the Great Pyramid.” But she pulled him up tight. By instinct, she knew that life wasn’t so funny for an overgrown cub who had been little enough to cuddle only a day or two ago, but now found himself pushed out of everybody’s lap to make room for the younger boys.

“Want to speak your piece for me?”

“N-no. It isn’t learned, yet.”

“Then you’d better learn it. Right away. Take your book up to the loft where the other boys won’t bother.”

Adoniram went, obediently. He sat an hour in the chilly loft wrapped in Joseph’s Coat and worked on his piece line by line. Even the separate lines spoken alone made his nose tingle and his eyes feel hot, but he stuck to it resolutely. At last he found that he could speak the resounding measures without one choke.

“I guess I can get through it,” he assured himself, and so took heart of grace.

Friday morning came inexorably. The pitiless hours raced on. Ten—eleven—twelve—the two younger brothers grabbed their dinner-pails and fled, whooping. But Donny wasn’t interested in turnovers and ginger-cake. One—two—three—

At four o’clock, Seth and Thomas hurtled into the kitchen.

"Donny said his piece, and then——"

"No, siree, he did *not* say it! He tried. But he couldn't say only the first two lines——"

Plunging after them, came Adoniram. His face was so white that his cinnamon freckles stood out in relief. His lips quivered. His hazel eyes widened with helpless misery. Valiantly he tried to answer Mercy's question. But the words were strangled on his mouth. With a drowning gulp he fled. You heard his copper-toes go clattering up the loft ladder.

"What under the sun——" But even Mercy couldn't know. Even Mercy couldn't understand that these tremendous magnificent words were too sublime, too cruelly exalting for a little boy, that their relentless majesty trod him into the dust, that he went down like a little defeated army before their trampling splendor.

Presently she slipped up the loft ladder. Donny lay curled in a ball, Joseph's Coat pulled over his head. She started to speak. Then suddenly she knew better. She lay down beside him and pulled Joseph's Coat and the poor little shaking nubbin into her arms. She did not say a word. She did not kiss him. Only she held him tight till that quivering little nubbin went limp, till she knew he had slipped off into exhausted sleep.

After a while her practiced ear realized that downstairs there sounded a portentous hubbub. Probably that was Father home with the mail. But why the uproar?

Cautiously she slipped her arm from under Donny. Cautiously she crept down the ladder. Stars lit in her eyes. Her heart began to pound. Almost a fortnight since she had had a letter. Surely, oh, surely——

As she reached the kitchen Seth banged in. His voice awoke the echoes.

"Mercy! Come, quick. You've got company! A great

big fellow so tall he bumped his head on the lintel and all dressed up in store clothes. He used to go to school with you at Antioch!"

Then, sibilant and terrifying, Aunty's voice:

"You, Seth! What if Mercy has got a beau? You needn't tell the township."

He was waiting for her. Waiting, right here in the living-room, with the children's arrowheads and playthings scattered about and the hearth untidy with ashes. Muddy tracks all over the rag rugs, muddy little shoes drying on the fender, small nameless garments damp from the wash on every chairback, Father's candid yellow undershirt, freshly ironed, hung out to mend. A great bowl of bread dough in its linen nightcap was put to rise in the chimney corner. Thus was set the stage for the coming of Henry Esmond, for Sir Lancelot, for the Prince of Dreams!

But Mercy tripped in airy and serene. It was only when she saw him that her heart caught in her throat. The room blurred and glimmered. For he was so much taller than she remembered him, he was so glorious. A curly-brim beaver crowned his young royal head, a beaver a size too large, so that it dipped over his ears, but was all the more regal for that. His new suit was to her eyes a mantle of splendor, although it had been cut so thriftily that it pinched his broad chest and reared up the back and climbed affrighted from powerful young wrists and muscular ankles. His suffocating stock, his cruel high boots! All this glory, all this young majesty, to stoop his lordly head and enter her humble door!

No sooner were they seated than the march past began. Of what avail, she reflected bitterly, to be the lady sought by this most noble knight if the entire population of southern Illinois must tread upon each other's heels to enter and to gaze?

First came the Captain. The Captain had his own snug little room, his big, warm stove, his turkey-red rocker. There he sat and dozed contentedly day after day. But to-day for the first time in weeks he must wander placidly in attired in extreme *négligé* and fondly clasping his villainous old pipe and sit down cheerfully to help entertain the guest. In meticulous detail, he described the battle of Lake Erie as beheld by his own eyes. After him, strolled Mouser. Mouser was shedding. Smug and condescending, he strolled up to the guest and rubbed against his leg, leaving on the black broadcloth a generous tribute of white hairs. Then he sat down facing him and viewed him with an unblinking stare.

After that Adoniram bolted in refreshed and rambunctious, Trouble bounding at his heels. He murmured a shocked—"Gosh, company!" and fled as one who flees the plague. Presently the kitchen door creaked. Twonnet's scowling eye appeared at the crack. Forthwith she entered, turkey wing and dustpan in hand.

"Never mind the hearth, Twonnet."

This was meant for dismissal. Twonnet did not accept dismissal readily. Gloomily she laid down the turkey-wing. Gloomily she crouched in a far corner. Her black brows drew into an ominous line, her black eyes were opaque and sullen. Her eyes never left Richard's face. In them flared an instant comprehension, a blistering jealousy so dark that it seemed to lie upon the air, a fury made visible.

Soon Jo Vanny limped in. At sight of the two, Jo Vanny felt no jealous pang. Not he! True child of his golden Sicily, he knew a lover when he saw one and rejoiced in him openly. He beamed on them and made happy little noises in his throat. He sat down on the floor, tucked his ragged toes into the warm ashes and smiled radiantly on. He looked a faun, stopping, with eerie curiosity, above the

hearth fire that would never be his, and poised like a wild thing for instant flight. But flight, alas, was the last thing in Jo Vanny's thoughts.

Ten minutes more and in charged Thomas, a mammoth splinter imbedded in his fat chapped thumb and roaring to high heaven. He hurled himself into Mercy's arms. Hotly embarrassed but anxious to aid, the Prince bent his lordly head, and helped dig out the splinter. Thomas showed scant gratitude. His sobs dwindled to snuffles, but he sat on, sucking his thumb. Occasionally he turned to Richard, glared, and stuck out a small lightning tongue.

Out of all her suffocating household only Cyrus had the manners to ignore the two. Calm, aloof, goggle-eyed, round and round his bowl he swam. Not once did he glance their way. Mercy felt a gloomy gratitude to Cyrus.

Last of all came Mr. Lincoln. He was in a large, harmonious mood. He threw off his gray shawl, settled down before the fire, and remarked that this was good courtin' weather; then he devoted half an hour or so to kindly inquiries about Antioch and Mr. Mann. This attended to, he observed—"Well, folks, there's another room in this house. I move the Court adjourns to the kitchen and leaves this bill in committee." Whereat he shooed out the whole roomful.

All but Thomas. Thomas looked up at Mr. Lincoln. This rock shall fly from its firm base as soon as I, said little Thomas's icy glare.

As they dragged unwillingly away, the last blow fell.

Mercy glanced up. In the old eagle mirror she saw her full reflection. A sick shudder ran through her.

No use. No hope. She could never hold up her head again. Wreck of matter. Crash of worlds.

Some time after supper she crept up to the loft, and took down her diary.

"Richard Harrison came to-day. I presume he will never come to see me again. When I think about it I wish I could lie down and die. All the folks came in and gawped at him, exactly as if he was stuck up at ten cents a look. And Twonnet sat like a bump on a log and scowled at him. And Thomas bellowed and stuck out his tongue. And considering the way I looked and always do, he will consider me a slattern and a Savage. First time he ever laid eyes on me, I had on my nightgown and Joseph's Coat, with the casket lining sawed out of it, and my hair all pigtails. Next time my shoestring broke. And to-day it was so chilly I had on my flannel petticoat, and when Thomas shovelled himself into my lap his heel caught the tilter of my hoop, and I didn't know till I looked in the mirror that it had hiked up till you could see a whole inch of stocking, and the red petticoat scallop, too.

"Of course he cannot wish to continue his acquaintance with such a Slap-Dash Sally-Ann. I cannot ask it. Never."

From the room below came Thomas's voice.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lincoln, sir, 'Doniram up and learned his piece slick as a whistle. But when he tried to say it he just choked up and bawled and ran."

"Let's see his piece. 'Scepter and Crown——' Um. Can't say I'm surprised at 'Doniram. If I tried to speak that first verse I'd choke up and bawl, too."

"What for?"

"Because there are some things that are too big and solemn and splendid for common ordinary folks like me to measure up to. Yes, I know just how Donny felt. When I was along nine I found Milton's *Paradise Lost* in a barrel of old books that some settler had left at the tavern. I can remember to-day how those harpings and hallelujahs went

thundering through me. I sniveled and sniveled and finally I went and crawled under the woodshed."

"Well, I never!" Through Thomas's eyes, you could see Mr. Lincoln's pedestal tottering beneath him. "Do you ever write poetry?"

Mr. Lincoln cocked a glimmering eye towards Father.

"If I ever did fall into poetry, Thomas, I'll wager mine would bring tears from a harder heart than yours."

Up in her loft Mercy turned a fresh page.

"He stayed a good while after they were gone, though. All but Thomas. And he got redder and redder, and I knew he wanted to say something, but I simply could not shake Thomas loose. Finally I said Maybe I'd make pancakes for supper if I had some obliging boy to make them for. And Thomas said, Buckwheat, with maple sugar? and I said Yes, so Thomas backed out, but he kept his tongue sticking out at Richard all the way. I fear Thomas will grow up a bargaining Jacob. Then Richard said, Where is that daguerrotype, and I hated to tell him that it would be unseemly for me to have one taken for him as long as another man is engaged to me, and he began to tease, only very dignified. But right then, Father came in. I guess Father had had a bad day for he looked awfully tired, and acted grumpier than Thomas, even, and did not so much as ask Richard to supper. If it was anybody but Father, I'd say he acted snippy, but Father never is snippy. He doesn't know how. So Richard went away. But as he went down the steps, he said, May I call when you are not so absorbed? and I said, Yes. Much chance he'll ever darken this door again!"

"I cannot think of any Spiritual Meditations to-night,

except what Job says, in Chapter Seven. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope.

It was late afternoon and raining, a cold, raw, dismal rain. Father was at work in the miry garden. Twonnet had plowed, the Captain had planted, now Father was weeding in between the drooping little stalks of corn. Somehow, thought Father, it had been always cold, always raining, this long, uncertain spring. His fine shoulders stooped. His eyes were sullen.

Here he had snatched his girl away from Green River, away from the risk of a too-early marriage to Lemuel G. Crowther, that young lumox. Then, when Lemuel loomed again on her horizon, he had sent her away to sanctuary at Antioch, only to throw her straight into the arms of this dashing young jackanapes of a Richard Harrison.—Oh, perhaps it was not just, to blame the boy. It was not his fault that his body moved slim and sinewy as a young panther's, that his mouth was the mouth of Buonarotti's David, that his bold head was crowned by a cap of lusterless waving black, miles from the perfumed and glistening brow of Lemuel G. Crowther. But the audacity of him, the devil-may-care bravado of him! How dared he force his acquaintance on Mercy Rose? For her to help tie up his broken head that night was hardly an act of encouragement. Mere common humanity. Yet, doubly insolent, he must follow her here, thrust himself, unbidden, inside her father's door!

Anger shook him. No, not just anger. The pitiful reasonless jealousy of the father who sees himself forgotten, left behind. . . .

“Father! Oh, Father!”

She was coming to him, racing down the path, ‘Doni-

ram's jacket flung scarf-wise over her head. She threw up her arm, pulled his head down and gave it a vehement squeeze.

"'Scuse, please. I haven't seen you since dinner-time. Listen." Her cheek to his, he could not see the mischief in her eyes. "A man just stopped by and asked, could he stay the night. He's a dripping sop, and tired, and I think he's hungry, too. Shall I bring him in?"

"Why, of course. Get my dry clothes out of the chest. Fix him something hot, and make up the fire. Did he tell his name?"

"N-no, sir, he didn't mention it. But I think it's Emerson."

"Emerson! You imp!"

As he dropped his hoe and turned toward the house, Emerson came down the path, hands outstretched. At sight of his flapping drenched coat, his bony ascetic face, his shining eyes, the gray day cleared and shone.

"Why couldn't you let me have word ahead?" Father gripped his shoulders hungrily. "You know I'd have come into town to meet you——"

"Because I didn't want you to try it. Our stage was six hours late. We brought all the top-soil in Sangamon County on our wheels." He shook off his wet greatcoat, took off his rusty boots before the fire and put on the rusty carpet-slippers that Thomas brought him. "Wish my Concord garden had some of this rain."

"How is your garden? Incidentally, how is your family? And all the friends in Concord?"

"Flourishing when I left. Especially Louisa Alcott. She sold a serial for a hundred and fifty dollars the other day and the family is rolling in her ill-gotten wealth. Bronson Alcott protests that there is not a word of constructive philosophy in the entire story, but he rolls, too. He and

Hawthorne both promised to drop in and tend garden while I'm away. If talk would weed beans I'd have a sovereign crop."

"My, it's good to see somebody from home. No matter who." Aunty stooped at the hearth to heat a kettle of venison broth. She beamed up at him. "And where have you been?"

"Lecturing. Iowa and Illinois. I've given eighteen lectures so far, with an average of seventeen people at each lecture."

"A good turnout. Considering you're so unorthodox. Now, Mercy, you mix up some batter-bread and send Twonnet to kill a couple of chickens, and I'll open my gingered pears and heat up a mince pie. It'll be pioneer food, Mr. Emerson, but maybe you can make out a meal."

As they sat down to their humble pioneer supper Mr. Lincoln dripped in. He was soggy-wet, splashed with mud, gray with fatigue. But at sight of Mr. Emerson, he fairly blazed alive.

Not one of the three men ever forgot that night. The hours marked for Mr. Lincoln a high tide. He listened to Father and to Mr. Emerson with a queer puzzled wistfulness. Always he had handled his slow, cold, logical mind as a sculptor would handle his chisel. But never had he dreamed of using it to carve such airy arabesque as this.

For these were men who used their fine intelligence not just as a laboring mechanism for reasoning, but as a gay diversion! Like hounds they raced, they doubled on their courses, they romped in a frolic of thought that held moments of friendly malice. One would nose out an idea, the other pounce on it instantly, worry it, harry it. They used their swiftest reasoning, their keenest logic, merely to stimulate each other. They assumed outrageous premises, then defended their moment's whim as frantically as if they

defended their altars and their fires. They brought up their light guns, their heavy guns, their earth-shaking artillery. . . .

Mr. Lincoln sat by, delighting in every sally, yet curiously, sadly, the outsider. For his own deep understanding, his hard-won culture, he had fought with blood and tears and hunger. Could there be men to whom this riches of learning could mean just a jeweled favor to pin on a coat?

Suddenly Father glanced Mr. Lincoln's way. Quick shame awoke in him. How stupidly he had neglected this beloved guest!

"Mr. Lincoln, you are not doing your share. Here we sit, deciding all the problems of the universe. Come on and do your part."

Mr. Lincoln grinned.

"I'm playing audience, thank you. And enjoying it. I never knew till to-night that folks could have so much fun with their minds. You've made me sweat to keep up with you."

"You'll make us sweat when it comes to arguing realities."

"Here, Stafford, don't pull a long face like that. I've had so many hard knocks the last few years that you can't know what it means to slip out of the harness like this and forget. Forget what a worthless old failure I am. Well, it does me no end of good to get away."

He pulled a long face then himself. A bitter long face. Harsh lines grooved themselves around his mouth. Black discouragement shadowed his eyes.

"If you're a failure," Father spoke sharply, "then Mr. Emerson and I are failures and worse. Here goes Mr. Emerson trudging around the country, trying to wake the people up with his books and his lectures. When he's lucky maybe seventeen people turn out to listen to him. Here I

go, bungling away at my newspaper. If I ever had as many as seven readers who agreed with me all at once, I'd feel I was a rival to Timon of Athens in his heyday."

Mr. Lincoln grimaced.

"You can count me as one reader who agrees with you. Almost to the last word."

"Not on the supreme issue, Mr. Lincoln."

Now Mr. Emerson rose up, whimsical, commanding.

"Let us have no slavery talk, gentlemen. Let us cease from our labors this one night and forget."

"I only wish we could forget." This from Father.

The three men stared at each other. Again it was as if an unseen Presence had put its eternal question. The anguished need of their vast, blind, tortured nation beat down on them like the winnowing of mighty wings.

Then Father spoke again. Bitter, disheartened words.

"It does not seem as if we three could ever amount to much. For by our own mouths we are failures at our own appointed work. How can we ever hope to solve the greatest problem of our day?"

Nobody spoke. Nobody tried to answer him. Unconsciously the men drew closer together. Three dead-tired, middle-aged men. Three failures.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MR. LINCOLN came riding down the turnpike, his tall, battered stovepipe pushed back from his face, his gray shawl swung over his shoulders. It had rained all day and the roads were mire. The prairie swales were flooded, the creek half a mile away was a rushing torrent. Old Tom's hoofs churned and splashed with every step. But Mr. Lincoln's eyes were placid with contentment. He had just won the Harkness case which had cost him weeks on weeks of steady work. Lloyd Harkness, brimful of gratitude for the farm that Mr. Lincoln had saved for him, had unstrapped his thin wallet and urged on him the full amount of his fee. His wife, a worn gentlewoman, had sobbed out words of gratitude that had brought the red to his gaunt neck. It was pretty fine to be able to help a deserving pair like the Harknesses. They had paid a generous fee, too. Twenty-eight dollars and fifty cents. This wasn't such a bad world, after all.

Under his breath he began to hum his beloved song—
“Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud——”

On the road ahead, stood a covered wagon. Not an opulent affair: a small vehicle half the size of the broad Conestogas and forlornly ill-equipped.

“Reckon they're stuck in this mud,” he thought.

He prodded up Old Tom, and rode alongside.

“Anything I can do, folks?”

The canvas parted. Two ashen young faces stared out at him. A girl, her face drawn, her eyes swollen: a boy, a frail and bewildered young fellow, holding a small box, wrapped in linen. They had none of the gay pluck of the

average young pioneer. They stared out at Mr. Lincoln like two beaten children.

“What’s up? Tell me. Maybe I can be of some use.”

“Nobody can be of any use.” The girl’s face was terrible. “For we daren’t wait a day, we’ve got to join our wagon train at St. Louis, and go on to Kansas with them. And they ain’t no way we can lay him in consecrated ground—— We got to leave him here all alone, on the prairie.”

“Mary pity women!” The poor young husband bowed his head. He was ghastly with the agony of her agony. Mr. Lincoln’s face was as ashen as her own.

“You poor child, your baby shall lie in a churchyard. You shan’t have to leave him alone.”

“But there isn’t a burying ground in miles, except across the creek. And look at that creek! Out of its banks and a current that would sweep a horse clean off its feet. Quicksands, too. The folks down to the Crossroads warned us. They ’lowed we can leave my baby in their dooryard, and they’ll take care of his grave, their own selves. But maybe they’ll have to give up their land, come another year. I can’t go away and leave him that-away. I can’t!”

“No. And you shall not. Wait.”

He rode away, back to the Crossroads. He stopped at the blacksmith shop, called the smith and his burly son to the door. Presently the three rode back to the wagon.

“Your team and the wagon will have to stay here. But we’ve fixed it up. Here, you fellows take down the wagon seat and put the mother on it. You can swim across the creek and float her between you. I’ll wade across because I’m the tallest, and carry him. I’ll manage all right if the water doesn’t reach my shoulders. Yes, I know there’s quicksands, but I’ll dodge ’em. Got to. Easy now!”

It was a long mile, across the flooded lands. The girl

never spoke. She sat there, high on the wagon seat, carved of grief.

The two men bogged and floundered across to the creek, the girl lifted between them.

When Mr. Lincoln reached the slippery bank, he halted, studied the swollen, rushing stream. He lifted the pine box with its precious bit of dust. He shoved on, slipping, splashing. The water was up to his chest. It crept an inch higher—another—

At last the girl and her carriers reached the bank ten yards below him. Mr. Lincoln waded and scrambled up a steep miry shelf. Finally he stood on safe higher ground. He stood there a minute, still holding the pine box high. Mud and water dripped from him: he looked like a tired scarecrow. Quiet, grotesque, sublime.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“**I** WILL say for Richard Harrison that he knows what he wants,” wrote Mercy in her diary that night.

“Talk about impudence! Here I thought I had such a grand letter, yet when I opened it, it held just four big pages of foolscap, with not one word written on them, except a line at the top of each page. ‘Don’t forget the daguerreotype. I’m starved for it. Better send me two daguerreotypes, I might lose one of them.’ I suppose I’ve got to have one taken, as long as he’s so pigheaded about it. Anyway, Father says that the daguerreotype wagon has come to town. I’ll go in before long, and see what it costs. I’ll take Thomas along. He’s been so good lately, it scares me. But how can I ever pay for a picture? I just know it will be all of a dollar. Maybe a dollar and a half.”

She put down her pen. She burrowed into the little trunk that held all her choicest possessions. If she could possibly manage it, she’d have him make two. Then she’d hide one away, to surprise Father on his birthday.

But she searched the trunk in vain. Trinkets, bits of old lace, a broken rose-coral necklace, two seed-pearl bracelets with half the pearls out, a filigree bouquet holder, three Bible bookmarks. And not one single copper cent.

Finally she pulled out a tiny shagreen case. Grandfather’s snuff-box. Within it was a brooch. An awful brooch. It was of black and gold enamel, containing a wreath, constructed from a lock of Great-grandfather Davenport’s hair.

"If I dared ask the daguerrier to take this pin in exchange. Maybe——"

But what an act of blasphemy, to put your great-grandfather's ringlets to such base uses!

"I suppose this is a judgment on me, because I am sort of playing fast and loose with Lemuel. Well, I never was really engaged to Lemuel, at that. Maybe it was unwomanly of me, to treat him as I have done. But if I just had a dollar and twenty-five cents——"

Rainbows dazzled on her wet lashes as she blew out her candle.

The great spring freshets had come, a tempest of rain and wind; then followed a tempest of splendor, the prairie spring. The sun stood high in cloudless blue, the earth was a tapestry unrolled of emerald and rose and deepening sapphire. Look to the south, and as far as you could see, the flag flowers spread their azure carpet. Look to the east, and the marsh was a sheet of pure gold. And all Mercy's hours struck golden bells, all her days were light and flame. Richard's letters came as if on wings. She read them, hid them, drew them out when the household was asleep, read them again, again. They were Richard himself, those letters. They were tender and arrogant, insolent and shy. She knew them by heart, every word. She told them over, beads upon her stainless rosary. Reading those letters, she would stop suddenly, and run to hug the nearest little brother, regardless of his protests, the tenderest pity aching in her heart. Poor, poor defrauded little boys! If they had only been born girls, what ecstasy might be in store for them!

Always from those letters shone the light that never

was on land or sea. And always at the end, a sentence that caught and tore her heart with agony. For into her garden of love had crept black fear.

“They all but got me, the other night. I was driving some refugees down the Ridge road, and a gang jumped out on me. I had good fresh horses, and a light load. I reckon that’s all that saved yours truly. Of course they fired on me. Took a slice off my left ear. If I couldn’t shoot straighter than that, I’d practice on a barn door. You are the loveliest girl in this world, and I think of you every minute. Just the same, if you don’t tend to that daguerreotype pretty soon, I’ll find me some other girl. Only I’ll never find a girl in all the world that can hold a candle to you——”

“When I think, how poor Father spent all those 60 dollars sending me off to college! I’m thankful I’ve got 17 dollars left of it, anyway.

“I ought to tell Father about Richard and me, but I am afraid he will think I am light-headed. To have two suitors at once. But how could anybody look at poor Lemuel, when Richard is around! Or even if he isn’t.

“I wish I had told him to take along an extra flannel shirt and some ague pills. Then if he has to drive all night, he won’t be near so apt to catch cold.”

Life, to Jo Vanny, had grown insupportable without his precious family. Day by day he grieved for the monkeys, night after night he mourned for Cartouche. Would the flatboat man feed the monkeys enough to hold their poor little skeletons together through the long winter? Would he procure for Cartouche, that aged and infirm treasure, abundance of bread and milk, for his toothless jaws? Or would he be fed on miserly bread and water, alone?

His mind grew racked with worry, his lonely little spirit chafed and fretted. Aunty dosed him with camomile tea. Mercy fussed up tempting messes for him. In vain. He drooped, he grew a shadow, even, of his piteous little self.

While Mercy was away, Mr. Lincoln had stopped in for supper even more frequently than before. Now, since the high water came, the roads were so atrocious that he took to spending the nights, as well.

"I don't see how I can keep on riding circuit, unless you take me in," he urged Father. "If I want to keep on practicing law, I've got to get me a web-footed horse. Or else swim. The chance to get fed up and dried out, midway my circuit, is worth good tavern money. And more."

Mr. Stafford shrugged.

"Let you pay? I'd like to see you try it. When we're deep in debt to you now, for all those victuals you've brought in!"

"Oh, all right, all right. Next time I go to St. Louis, I'll order me a diver's suit."

Mr. Stafford went to Mercy. She listened, while rolling out cooky dough with swift, deft hands.

"Please let him pay, Father. I hate to tell you, but as soon as the cobbler comes by, I've got to have shoes made for all three little boys. And they must have new pantaloons apiece. They're simply destitute. And Thomas's new roundabout is split down the back. He did that digging for treasure, in the Indian mound."

"Confound those mounds! The children have wasted months clawing through them. But where will he sleep?"

"He can share the big loft with the boys. They'll love to have him."

"That makes us pretty crowded. 'Specially since I've brought the press home, till the office is repaired."

"Well, don't let's mind. Besides, I feel lots safer to have you right in reach. When I think of that mob, and their tar-bucket——"

Her Father chuckled. It was quite as well that she had not seen the latest warning sent to him: a pleasing reminder.

"Plenty more Turpentine and matches where those came from. We want no Agitators here. Take your chance wile you got one."

Mr. Lincoln came. As Mercy suspected, he came in order that his tiny "tavern money" should help them through these shoal waters. But she did not suspect his deeper motive: his determination that, by his intimacy with the household, he would influence public opinion in Father's favor. He knew, too well, how strong had been the shift of local thought, from moderate friendliness to actual opposition. Nobody loves a man who has incurred the dislike of an obscure yet powerful faction, which may vent its disapproval on the victim's acquaintance.

Very soon, his shrewd diplomacy bore fruit in increasing neighborliness. There came even a dozen or so new subscribers to the *Clarion*. Unhappily, these were paid for in somewhat dubious coin.

"My last subscriber brought in a load of sprouted potatoes, and another man offered me a goat. Said it had been raised a pet, but it was getting so cantankerous, he didn't want it around the children any longer. I suppose he thought my own children were made of more enduring stuff than are his own."

"Oh, Father! Let me have it! I'll teach it to draw a little wagon."

"Yes, but you won't teach it to refrain from butting Aunty and Mercy. That will do, Thomas. No use pucker-

ing up. I suppose that man remembered we once quartered a circus here."

"Even if he didn't," Mr. Lincoln's face was lamblike. "Even if he didn't, he may feel that an Abolitionist headquarters is pretty much the same thing."

Father grinned reluctantly. Try as you might, you could never stand out against Mr. Lincoln.

Thanks to his championship, the social leaders, too, grew more friendly. Aunty was keenly gratified by her frequent invitations. Quiltings, sewing bees, sings, church suppers, house-raising dinners, poured in upon her.

"If I wasn't so trembly nowadays, I'd admire to go to every one of 'em. And of all things, I wish I could go to that church carpet-supper. I always did feel the Methodists was misguided, but they're cream kind, for all that. Don't you want to go and take the boys? I've promised the committee a whole quarter. It's a shame if we can't get three meals out of that, four maybe."

"I don't believe I care to." Mercy was all dimples. A church carpet-supper, indeed, when she had a fat letter from Richard up her sleeve, and not a free minute, so far, to read it! "I'll send the little boys."

Donny had gone to town with Father, but Thomas and Seth, after being scrubbed, polished and rigidly inspected, were permitted to go. Afterwards Mercy regretted that she had not left Richard up her sleeve, and accompanied them. For it was not three hours till Thomas appeared importantly, dragging an all but comatose Seth.

"Well, it was this way. I ate lots of breakfast this morning, so I wasn't so very hungry. But Seth, he was plumb starved. And when we got there, they had wild turkey, and roast ham, with cloves in, and partridges with bacon on 'em. And Mis' Isaiah Brooker, she says to holp ourselves, plenty. And Seth, he holp himself——"

"Helped, not holp, Thomas."

"Yes, Ma'am. So Seth, he helped himself plenty. And I took some turkey, but I wasn't very hungry. But Seth, he et and he et——"

"Ate, Thomas."

"Yes, Ma'am. Ate. Well, he ate. Then comes Mis' Isaiah, and she says, 'Land o' Goshen, look at that poor child's plate! Scraped clean!' So she fetches him some more turkey. And a great sasserful of succotash, and five or six sweet pickles. And a great slice of venison. I forgot they had venison. And Seth didn't want to be impolite. So he et that. And I wasn't hungry. Then after a while comes Missis Isaiah's grown-up daughter, with a big crock of smearcase, and another of cabbage, and some spiced pears."

"So Seth piled Ossa upon Pelion." Father spoke somewhat grimly. Thomas looked doubtful.

"I didn't see any of that."

"Never mind. It would be easier to catalogue Homer's ships. Cut it short, son."

"Well, somebody had sent Mis' Rogers a sack of raisins. So she had made raisin pie. And Seth ate that. Then some of the other boys told Seth he dasn't smoke some of their sweet fern. And Seth didn't want to be rude, so he did. Then we had some watermelon preserve. And Seth, he didn't want to slight anybody."

"Don't worry, Thomas. Nobody could have felt slighted."

"Anyhow, after a while, I got scared. And I said, 'If you don't quit, you'll have the bellyache——'"

"Thomas!"

"Yes, Ma'am. And he's got it."

"Hard luck, Seth," Mr. Lincoln consoled him, later. "We've all tried to please everybody in our day. We've

been lucky if we got off with nothing worse than a stomach-ache. Now hurry and get well. That flatboat fellow who took Jo Vanny's menagerie is back in Beardstown. He is going to show his animals in every township in Illinois, he says. Now I've got four dimes, and they'll burn four holes in my pocket if I don't go to see those animals, and take three friends with me, and be quick about it."

Jo Vanny was sitting at the hearth, shelling corn. He looked up, he stared wildly. Without waiting for his supper, he fled to the barn, hitched the spotted ponies to his red-and-gold wagon, and was on his way.

The flatboat man had gone to the postoffice. But the lady of the boat received Jo Vanny, totally without enthusiasm.

"Yes, I never seen you before, but I know who you are. Now don't let me catch you, bringing any more heathen beasts around, and tryin' to palm 'em off on us for the winter."

Jo Vanny tried to explain, but his English deserted him. Only by violent gestures did he make his wishes clear.

"You mean, *you want to take 'em back?* Land's sakes, take 'em, and good riddance. Here, what you up to? My grief, you lettin' that lion loose?"

Jo Vanny had flung open Cartouche's door. He was weeping on Cartouche's giant shoulder. He showered the monkeys with embraces. These were his people, these were his treasures. Jo Vanny was as one who, long exiled, treads again the soil of home.

"Say, calm down. No use having convulsions all over the place."

The flatboat lady and a couple of ferrymen, charmed with their novel task, helped hoist the cages into the wagon. Mindful of Father's irrational objections, Jo Vanny drove his treasures to an abandoned cabin, well past the marsh.

When Father and Mr. Lincoln rode home, Jo Vanny

sat on the back steps, exuding an aroma that set both horses dancing. Jo Vanny poured out his hopes. If Father would give him use of his shack, he would make it a zoo, charge five cents admission, earn boundless sums, at once. His sole expenses would be food, and a fiddle. The fiddle, his eloquent hands set forth, was necessary to lure by its music the wandering passer-by.

Father refused flatly. Jo Vanny could take his animals to whatever spot on the earth's surface he chose. But no circus in the Stafford marsh. That was that.

Jo Vanny made no protest. He was used to refusals. He gathered himself up, twisted leg, bent little back and all. He hobbled weakly away, down the miry road.

Father looked after him.

"If it wasn't for the little boys——! But no keeping them away from that shack. They'll spend the rest of their natural lives carrying mush and milk to the lion, they'll fall down and worship the monkeys till doomsday."

Mr. Lincoln maintained a judicial silence.

"Besides, it'll be an odious nuisance, having him within half a mile of the house. No-no, the horses won't notice the odor, that far. But he'll be perpetually trudging over, for food and help and advice and kindling-wood, and Heaven knows what. Better settle the thing, once and for all."

Mr. Lincoln stooped from his horse, pulled a grass blade, nibbled it reflectively.

"Though I've always said, I'd never turn away anybody—— Hi, Jo Vanny! That's poison ivy you're pulling! Give that to the monkeys, and you'll have a community funeral on your hands. Isn't that just what you could expect? The poor oaf, he doesn't know a deadly poison when he sees it!"

"When I was down in St. Louis, last month," thus Mr.

Lincoln, innocent as the Serpent in the Garden, "I saw what looked like a mighty good violin, stuck in a pawnshop window. I asked the man what he wanted for it. He tried to stick out for seven dollars and a half. I'll bet he'd be glad to hand it over for five, cash."

Jo Vanny plodded on.

"Hang it, the poor fool didn't even stop for his supper! And of course he hasn't so much as a spoonful of meal in his shack. No fire to cook it with. No stove, no bed, no anything——"

Far ahead, the little stumbling figure struggled on. On through the thickening dusk.

Father hesitated one minute more. Then he gave Button a slap. Top speed, he galloped down the road.

Mr. Lincoln looked after him. Over his gaunt face came a wide, contented grin.

"Next time I get to St. Louis, I reckon I may's well buy that violin."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“YOU'RE figuring on staying in Illinois this summer?”
“Yes, sir.”

“You've found a good job, then?”

“Y—yes, sir.”

Mr. Lincoln swung back comfortably in the big hickory rocker. Upon him lay a veritable halo of beneficence. Ten minutes ago Richard Harrison had arrived, a dressy young princeling, to call on Mercy. When the pop-eyed Seth had ushered him in (“Here's Mercy's company—*again!*”) Mr. Stafford had glanced up from his newspaper and given the boy a nod of greeting so curt that it verged on rebuff, then had risen, glowering and pale, and stalked from the room without one word. In the kindness of his heart Mr. Lincoln had flung himself into the breach. You couldn't blame Stafford for being jealous of this young Majesty. Even his own seasoned old heart owned a twinge at the swift radiance on the girl's flower-like face. But it was hard for the boy to find himself so unwelcome. He would stay and visit with the two for awhile. Thus he would put young Majesty at ease.

He launched cheerfully into a topic which vastly interested him nowadays: the chances of Federal improvement of the Sangamon River. Statistics flowed from his tongue. Plans, concessions, appropriations, details without number, were spread before the two. He was so intent on his cherished topic that he took no heed whether or not his hearers were interested.

Richard never took his eyes from Mercy, save to look bleakly upon the clock. Mercy never once took her eyes

from Richard for any purpose whatever. All that greeting radiance was dimmed in gray despair.

"You'll see this sparse untraveled country blossom as the rose before you two get your growth."

"Yes, Mr. Lincoln."

"And you will live to enjoy, not only prosperity, but modest wealth, if this plan is carried through."

"Yes, Mr. Lincoln."

"Well. Reckon I'll be going. Mercy, did your Father say he would be riding back to town this afternoon?"

"Yes, Mr. Lincoln. He must be at the office by two."

"By two? On my word, it's close on two, now. You will excuse me?"

They would, they certainly would, so they assured him, with a willingness all but pitiful. Mr. Lincoln beamed on them, and departed happily certain of a kindly service graciously done.

The two looked at each other, dazed at this unexpected reprieve. Silently, as with unspoken accord, they fled the house.

"We can sit on the far side of Mount Everest," quavered Mercy. Mount Everest was Seth's name for the tallest of the little Indian mounds.

"Yes, let's. Nobody will bother us there. Not unless the Captain comes along. Or Twonnet, or your Aunt Celestia, or a few of the little boys. I'd really like half an hour to myself if you can spare it from your folks. I've got something to tell you. This looks like my only chance before I go away."

Dread knocked at Mercy's heart.

"Go away?"

"The Underground folks are sending me to Pitts Landing, near St. Louis. From there I'm to drive the route to Davenport, then hand over my passengers to a man who

will take them on to Chicago. I may not get back this way before September."

Mercy did not answer. She could not. She sat down on the warm, dry grass atop Mount Everest. Richard did not say anything more. He stared out over the prairie. On this tiny vantage point, the one lift in that endless golden-green, you stood as on a ship at sea. Before you, behind you, stretched that vast rolling, burning floor. Mile on mile, world upon shining world. Liquid gold, the gold of the waist-high shoulder-high prairie grass, waves on waves baked as by furnace heat, under that molten sunshine. Liquid gold, dappled with cloud-shadows that raced over it like tall ships flying before the high sweet midsummer gale. And always that rising, falling tide of wind, that eternal lullaby, that hush, hush, hush of the sleeping prairie sea.

"Don't keep looking back at the house, Mercy. Yes, I know the little boys will be coming home half-starved. But I'm starved myself. For—you."

"Oh, well—" Mercy would not let herself smile, she would not look his way. Starved, was he? Because he had seen her only once since Monday? Starved for her? Oh, if she could just look up at him, smile at him, tell him! Tell him of her own hunger for him, of the love that ached in her throat, that quivered on her mouth! But before her eyes, like a drawn sword, hung the thought of Lemuel: the blighting memory of that lost letter. . . .

Richard leaned closer. At last, shy, bold, he slipped his arm around her. His rough sleeve was hot from the sun. Its prickle burnt deliciously on her cheek. Only this one day together. Then he would be gone the whole cruel summer. And she would have to live and bear that separation. Well, she couldn't live and bear it, that was all. Three

whole months, with not a sight of him? She could not. She'd drown.

"Where's that daguerreotype you promised me?"

"Promised you?"

Richard laughed out. Oh, how could he laugh, how could he?

"Trying to slip out? No use. Because I'm going to have that picture of you, whether or no. It isn't safe to let me start away without one, see? I might happen across some other girl, and forget all about you by to-morrow morning. Only—"

Mercy held her breath.

"Only—no chance that I'd ever find a girl to hold a candle to you. Not anywhere."

Silence.

"Listen. After all that,—don't I deserve that daguerreotype?"

But Mercy's stern little chin was quivering.

"I—I haven't a picture of myself. If I had—why—maybe— But I can give you a keepsake, if you l-like."

She tugged at the blue ribbon round her neck. The carnelian ring hung there no longer. But the ribbon held the family locket.

"If you'd like it, I—I'd be very pleased to give you this. I'm sorry it isn't real gold. Thomas cut his teeth on it, and he sucked off the gold, you see. There wasn't much to begin with. But I've always liked it because Thomas enjoyed it so much. If you care to have it—"

"Care for it—*care* for it!" All the teasing fun went out of Richard's face. Mercy pulled the locket from her neck, laid it in his hand. She looked up. But her eyes fell before the look in his own eyes. The look Father gave her, so many times. The look Adoniram gave her, when she had

dragged him through a lonesome spell. And something more. Something far more.

"It has a place for a lock of hair, but I guess Thomas chewed it till he broke the catch."

"What do I want with a lock of your hair? You blessed little fool! When I—I'm going to have all of you!"

He was crouched on his knees now, his black head against her little shoulder, his big body trembling. Mercy pushed him back. Although her heart was breaking in her breast.

"Richard, I can't. I—— Oh, I've got to tell you!"

"Tell me what?" All his white adoration was gone in a breath. "Who is it? Who *is* this other man you're holding to? The one who gave you that ring—I knew it! You're still holding fast to him, you still want him. More than you want me!"

"Oh, Richard! Don't make it so hard. I—I had a letter from him. And I've lost it. And—— Oh, I don't want to make it too cruel hard for him."

"Have you any idea, how hard you're making it for me?" Then, suddenly changing his mood:

"Mercy, I came on purpose to tell you that I haven't one solitary dollar to my name." He laughed out, as at some delightful joke. "But by fall I'm hoping my guardian will come around and be generous. He's had these tempers before, and it takes him about a year to sweeten up each time. Maybe, by fall, he'll let me have my interest money again. It amounts to nearly two hundred, now. And if I can get work this winter, any work at all, I ought to be able to save up fifty dollars or more. Then, by spring, I—I've got to have you. No, don't start telling me that they can't spare you at home. Of course they can't spare you. They never can. But no more can I. I've got to have you. I can't go on living, without you. And as for that fellow back east——"

Mercy laid a soft little silencing hand on his mouth. It

completely failed of its purpose. Richard snatched it and put a band of kisses round the warm little wrist and down the satin palm.

“Oh, but Richard——” Locked doors cannot hold back a New England conscience after all.

“Of course your father will never give you up. You need not tell me that. But he doesn’t understand how I’ll take care of you. I’ll never let anything hurt you, my sweet. I’ll never forget you. Not for one single hour——”

After all, what chance has a New England conscience against Majesty and nineteen?

The long gold day burned on. Wrapped in that immortal light, they sat together, spoke their immortal lines, grave young actors rapt in their undying rôles. Rôles taught them before the breath was on their lips or the pulse-beat in their hearts.

Finally Richard stood up.

“I’ve got to go, Mercy. I’m riding to Springfield tonight, then taking the early stage to St. Louis. I’ll come back, the very first chance I get, if I can only stay an hour. And you’ll write to me? You’ll remember——”

“I’ll remember.” Mercy walked silently beside him. A curious shyness seized on both.

“Then,—Even though you won’t promise, you do care——”

Suddenly Mercy pulled her hand away.

“Richard, look yonder. See that man on horseback riding south across the prairie. Is that one of the Clary gang, do you suppose? What can he be doing, on Father’s land? Richard, what is he up to?”

Richard stared against the dazzle of prairie and sky.

“What can he be doing? He’s stooping right out of the saddle——”

"I know that. I know what he's doing too. Blow your horn for Twonnet, Mercy. Quick. Get all the blankets in the house and wet them at the well. Find Adoniram and put him on my horse and send him to town for your father and Mr. Lincoln. Tell him to bring everybody else who'll come and help."

"Richard, *what is it?*"

Over the lake of the prairie whiffed up a faint purplish cloud.

"Making another try to burn your father out, that's all. He's set the grass afire. The wind is blowing straight this way."

One hour, two hours, three. It seemed to Mercy that she had toiled for years, pumping water from the well, throwing in the singed sodden blankets, rushing back and forth to Father, to Mr. Lincoln, to Richard, where they plowed and slashed at the tall grass like madmen, to cut their fire-break before these creeping flames should crowd their way past. She splashed water over the men continually so that the sparks which blew everywhere should not char their clothing and burn their flesh. Twonnet, her dark face crimson, worked nobly, shoulder to shoulder with the men. The old Captain, who had struggled from his bed to help, crept along behind and beat feebly at treacherous little smolders. Aunty and the little boys toiled with all their might. Nobody spoke. Every breath was precious.

Flame and heat and cruel hurrying wind. Sparks that lighted on your hair, your drenched pink dimity, your sodden slippers. Sparks blowing past your face, a hideous fiery rain. Father and Richard and Mr. Lincoln had thrashed out blaze after blaze, pounded down each rising flame as it flared alive. If they could stop that new fire behind the

barn. . . . If they could trample back those nests of gusty fire that leaped up almost at the cabin door. . . .

After a while, she knew dimly that she was back in the cabin, sitting on the big lounge. Thomas, hoarse and screaming with excitement, flounced in her lap. Mr. Lincoln stood at the water-pail gulping down gourdful after gourdful. It seemed as if he would never get enough, as if he were parched inside, just as he was parched and seared and dried to a crackle outside, every brave inch of him. He looked rather funny, too, she reflected dizzily, for he was still wearing his jim-swinger Court Day coat; he'd never thought to take it off. The strips of ruined cloth were actually falling from him in tatters. His trousers were all burnt, too. His shoes were done for. Everybody's shoes were ruined, as well as everybody's clothes. Her pink dress was burnt in spots, and torn to rags on her. As for Richard, he was worse than rags. As Aunty laid her hand on his shoulder, the jeans shirt came off him, in one baked-to-powder strip. Richard did not seem to notice that. He was sitting very dignifiedly on a kitchen chair, and he kept saying over and over: "S-nothing. Guess I'll go home. Soon's I can see—"

"Much you'll go home. You'll stay right here. Mercy Stafford, wake up, can't you? Bring me that linseed oil your pa bought for the new paint, and fetch my camphor bottle. Don't you see this boy can hardly sit up?"

Then Mercy woke up. She could not say much, but she could work, blindly, stupidly. Everybody had burns and scorches, but Richard's hurts were by far the worst, and he was near collapse. He roused soon, and tried to make light of his injuries, but the rest worked on, with every remedy at hand.

"Carry him into my room," commanded Aunty. "Take

his feet, John. You, Mr. Lincoln, carry his head—I said *carry* it, not ram it against the door frame! There. That's better. Mercy, make some coffee and we'll give him some soon's he can swallow. John, you look beat out. Better drink some, right away. And Mr. Lincoln, too. Mercy Rose, do you know a coffee-pot when you see one or shall I come and point it out to you? Then you menfolks lie down and get a wink of sleep——”

“Sleep!” Mr. Lincoln soused linseed oil on his tortured hands. “We men will patrol that prairie for the night. If that flame jumps up again, no saving this house, nor anything else.”

Before Aunty had finished her bandaging Richard lay in a leaden sleep. Mercy, still dazed and clumsy, made the coffee for Father and Mr. Lincoln. The two swallowed it hurriedly and then stumbled outdoors again. She poured left-over mush and milk down the little boys and ordered them to bed. They went without protest, so tired they could hardly wait to pull off scorched jackets and crackling, splitting shoes.

Presently she crept up the ladder-steps after them. She sat down at her window and looked out dully. Only an hour ago, and they were all wading in smoke and flame. But now the wind had gone down with the sun, the air grew swiftly cooler. Only a gleam of sunset still lighted the clouded west. Like scraps of tinsel, the first stars floated in a smoky blue bowl of sky.

“I'd like to lie down just one minute,” she thought. But she was too tired to stir. Too tired to sleep. She knelt down by Thomas's cot. Thomas was too deep in sleep to cuddle up to her for his prayers, even. . . .

Forty yards away, Father and Mr. Lincoln stood talking. Their voices were low, but she heard every word,

“Oh, don't take it so hard, Mr. Lincoln. They're trying

to drive me out to be sure. But I'm getting used to that. What does rasp on me is the fact that I'm making no headway. Here I've planned and hoped that I could convince a few thinking men. And so far, I have done more harm than good, seems to me. Instead of convincing, I've repelled. I haven't won an inch of ground. Not even with you."

"Well, I'd be mighty small game if you had brought me down. A third-rate backwoods lawyer like me. But you've got to have patience, Stafford. One of these days this nation will listen to you with an open mind. But you've got to give these changes time. A whole lot of time."

"If you believe, Mr. Lincoln, that this nation can afford to spend much time in vain argument!" Father's voice stung with cold anger.

"They're both so worked up over their old argument they'd never notice it if the whole prairie burst into fire around them," Mercy thought. "And I'll wager neither one of them has given Richard another thought. Not even gone in to give him a drink of water."

Her head sank. Not knowing, she must have slept. For when she roused herself all was black darkness.

She crept down the ladder. Sprawled on the keeping-room floor, not even a pillow under his head, lay Mr. Lincoln, sleeping like a log. Sprawled on the kitchen floor lay Father. Not Gabriel and his trump could ever have roused those two.

She slid into Aunty's room. Aunty slept too, balanced precariously upright in the pomegranate rocker. Had she searched for days she could not have found a more wretchedly uneasy seat.

And prone on the pineapple bed, the four mutilated little hands stretched up appealingly around him, lay Richard. He lay thrown down like a drowned creature, every muscle

lax. His poor funny hands were the size of sofa cushions. Around his black head, Aunty had tied her blue check apron, turban fashion, to hold the bandages in place on his singed scalp. And from him there emanated a mingled and overpowering fragrance. Camphor, linseed oil, mutton-tallow, liniment, camomile, rosemary, sage,—every aroma ever known to Araby the Blest and elsewhere. All: all save bergamot.

Not even a whiff of bergamot.

Candle in hand, Mercy leaned over him. He was so lost in sleep it was as if he lay carved in effigy, carved in one with the straight white folds of linen, the great sculptured bed. So lost, so far away. His beautiful marred face was as moveless as though it lay beneath deep water.

She leaned closer. Her soft lips touched his forehead, brushed his hair, more lightly than the breeze. So Psyche bent over her sleeping Eros. So bent the girl queen of the far Latmian night above Endymion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“**T**HOMAS, come here. Want to do something grand with me?”

“What?” Thomas hung back. Jo Vanny had said something about cutting the lion’s toe-nails that week in the dark of the moon, and Thomas was sticking to Jo Vanny’s shack like glue. Not for a king’s ransom would he have missed that auspicious rite.

“Listen. It’s a secret. We’re going across the bluffs to that daguerrier-wagon—you remember? You and I, ‘purpose to have our picture taken. For—Father’s birthday. Isn’t that fine?”

Thomas was interested but not enthusiastic.

“Do I have to get washed?”

“You have to get washed anyhow. You might as well make up your mind to that. Thomas Stafford, what *is* that in your pocket?”

“Well, you needn’t squeal so. It’s nothing but a poor little snake. It’s all dead, besides, it can’t hurt you——”

“If you think I’ll have a dead snake coming to the dinner-table——! Throw it away, then go wash your hands, and be quick about it.”

“I want to give it to Cartouche. I’ll bet he’d like it. To eat.”

“Lions don’t eat snakes.”

“Maybe they do. I want to try him with it. I’ll bet he likes it if I give it to him.”

“Thomas, if Aunty hears you say I’ll bet again, you’ll go without your supper.”

“Well,—Mr. Lincoln says it. All the time.”

Mercy had learned to crawfish, too.

"Oh, all right! Take it over to Cartouche, then hurry back. I want to start for the daguerrier's soon 's we're ready."

"Do we go the bridge way?"

"We do not. We go up Post-office Hill."

"But I want to go the bridge way. It feels so funny, when you stand in the middle and jump up and down. The bridge goes rickety-rackety like it would tumble down any minute."

"That's just what it will do one of these days. Father says it's a shame to the county it hasn't been taken down long ago."

Little Thomas's face clouded.

"If we dassent go the bridge way, I'd rather stay home. Maybe Jo Vanny will cut Cartouche's nails to-day. If he did and I wasn't here I couldn't stand it."

Mercy had not the cruelty to shatter this hope.

"You tell Jo Vanny to come over, right away. I want to give him a bucket of cornmeal to cook for the monkeys. Then I'll make him promise that he will not touch Cartouche unless you're there. Not even trim his whiskers."

Reassured, Thomas departed, swinging his votive offering by its dejected tail. Mercy hurried into her treasured blue delaine, her Chantilly shawl, her pearl necklace. She borrowed Aunty's carriage parasol, a small but ponderous relic covered solidly with black crape and adorned with a thick moss fringe, which made it look like a mushroom in mourning. She pinned on the tombstone, thrust her round arms into lacy Sunday mitts. Thomas, sweetly docile, endured not only a wash but a choking clean collar and a flowing plaid tie.

The parasol took splendidly, and you could easily tell Mercy and Thomas apart, but that was about all you could

say. Despite the Iron Maiden's clutch on his upper vertebra Thomas had moved, and his face was smeared all over Mercy's shoulder, while Mercy looked rising thirty and of a morose disposition. This was due to the head-brace, which dug steadily into her left ear. The artist had posed her in wistful grace, looking backward over one lovely shoulder, but between the brace and the camera she appeared vindictive rather than wistful. However, a daguerreotype is a daguerreotype. If only Richard liked it! That was all she could ask.

When it came to payment the daguerrier was a trifle reluctant about accepting the hair brooch. Mercy assured him that Great-grandfather had been the greatest shipmaster that ever sailed out of Salem Harbor, but he was not impressed. However, he owned that there might be six bits' worth of gold in it. And he threw in two glazed-paper envelopes with raised forget-me-nots on, for good measure.

Going home across the bluffs Thomas insisted on crossing the bridge. It was not a bridge but a handful of groggy planks over a deep gully, perhaps fifty feet in depth, and half a mile long. To cross on it would save a long, muddy walk.

"Please, Mercy! I won't jump, honest! We can scoot right across, just *that* quick!"

"Well——" Mercy hesitated, then yielded. Some distance down the road she saw a familiar figure approaching: Frederick Owen, toplofty as always, his fine long dove-colored coat flung back, his purple waistcoat ablaze with the big diamonds that kept Bakerstown dazzled and agape. He caught her eye: he swung off his curly white beaver and gave her a roistering salute. His impudent voice rang out:

"Good morning, Beauty! Wait, I'll cross the bridge with you. My team is across the gully. I'll drive you home."

Mercy gave him a freezing nod and quickened her steps.

Stiff as a ramrod, she hurried on towards the bridge; but as she neared it, Thomas let out a surprised yelp.

“Look, Mercy! Somebody’s started to tear it down! Both big boards are torn out!”

She looked. Yes, the big boards lay on the gully edge. There remained but one footboard and a hand-hold. The bridge was little more than a cobweb. It actually swayed in the wind. Behind them Owen shouted with laughter.

“No good running away, Beauty! You’ll have to take the long way after all. Come back and walk with me like a lady.”

Mercy stared around her. Not another soul in sight. She was well outside the village. The nearest farmhouse was half a mile away.

The man laughed again, loudly. Something in that laugh drove the blood from her heart.

“Afraid of me, hey? You lovely little fool! Here, don’t risk that bridge! Don’t you see they’ve started to pull it down?”

“Thomas! Run. Quick!”

Thomas shot across the bridge. Mercy flashed after him. The narrow board seemed to crumple under their feet. As they stepped on the farther edge, it swayed like a branch in the wind.

“Goody, didn’t she rock, though!”

“We’ve made it——” Mercy stood trembling. “Now he’ll make it too——”

He was making it. He was laughing at the top of his voice and flourishing his hat and cane. He’d had something to drink. A good deal to drink. Oh, hurry, hurry! But desperate terror kept Mercy motionless.

Owen came on, leisurely and triumphant. He kept on laughing, that maudlin, cheerful laugh. Midway the bridge he paused and flourished his hat again.

That flourish was fatal. Under his feet the light boards swung, tilted, yielded. With a whoop of fright he leaped forward. He reached the farther rim just as the bridge wavered once more, fell. Had he been sober, he could have made it: but his unsteady hand clutched the upright just as it toppled down.

Yet luck was with him. Not a timber struck him. He did not even fall to the bottom of the gully. Instead, he lunged against the slanting wall, then rolled and clawed and tumbled on down by degrees. Twice he caught the bushes, but they tore loose. Clawing, spraddling, swearing, he bumped on, bumped on, till he landed with a splash in the muddy rivulet below.

He stood up, also by degrees. He regarded his once dove-colored greatcoat, he pawed at his unspeakable trousers, his spattered purples. He picked up his fine beaver hat. Not even the parent beaver would ever have known her child.

Little Thomas gazed down. He emitted a shocked giggle. That giggle was the last straw. Owen threw down his hat and jumped on it. His yells of rage echoed down the gully.

“Think this is funny, don’t you! Jus’ you wait. Jus’ wait till I get out. Then I’ll show you——”

“Run, Thomas!”

“I want to wait and see him climb out——”

“Run, I tell you!”

Thomas ran. But his sturdy legs could not keep up with Mercy’s flying feet. He was panting and breathless when they reached the highroad. He was wabbly and indignant when they stumbled up their own lane.

“You’re awful silly, Mercy. He wouldn’t have hurt you. Come along, let’s tell Father how funny he looked. Like a toad in a mud puddle——”

“Thomas, you listen to me. If you ever tell one single

solitary word about this, I—I'll make Father send Jo Vanny and Cartouche away forever. Hear that!"

Richard did like the daguerreotype. He wrote in detail to that effect. Although he remarked that he was never quite certain whether he was kissing Mercy or the parasol. Or possibly little Thomas. He complained, too, that in her white shawl with her face turned a-lack-a-daisy over her shoulder, Mercy put him in mind of the late Mrs. Lot of Sodom, and that he found on his lips a taste of salt. And was she quite sure that she was gazing back regretfully at Sodom, and not at that fellow back east.

But that was just Richard's way. None the less, that lurking fear for him, that creeping dread, drew closer, closer. Always heavy on her heart lay that dark shadow-brother of Love, who is Fear.

Why must love be like this, she wondered. The books told you it was all roses and nightingales, moonlight and dreams. Much the books knew about it! It was joy, yes, but it was joy all stained and blurred and made bitter by pain, by anxiety, by rasping, aching dread. It swung you up on a leaping flame of rapture. Then at a breath, a word, that flame could sink to ashes at your feet.

On the days when Richard's adoring, bullying letters were due, Mercy would be a winged creature, young morning in her eyes, her face a rose. But let that letter be delayed a day, two days. Mercy would not say one word. She would cook and sweep, and wash little Thomas's everlastingly grimy hands; she would oil Seth's cowlick, and cuddle Adoniram through a lonesome spell; she would tend on Aunty and settle one fracas after another between the jealous Twonnet and the quarrelsome Jo Vanny. But she would stumble through her hours like a creature too dazed to speak her grief, too stricken to fight against it. Those days she would sit in the window, a basket of mend-

ing in her lap, her needle wavering through torn roundabouts or disgraceful socks. Why couldn't love be just love, alone? Why must it be so rooted and grounded, so woven and interwoven, so cruelly close with pain?

Day after day, night after anguished night, her misery walked with her. "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon——" To-night, Donny had read the ancient mystic words. Well, Donny and the Bible were both wrong. Glory? Terror. Terror of the sun, the cruel blinding sun, that would hurl down its pitiless heat as Richard rode those long, long prairie miles to his meeting-place. Another terror of the moon, the pale malicious moon, who would tilt her white lantern through the woods, reveal the dark wagon and the cowering black faces within it as clear as day. Another terror of the stars, the bland, indifferent stars. They could destroy him without an effort. They wouldn't turn traitor like the moon. Not they. They would give always a light so faint, so dim, that for all his straining eyes Richard could not read the blazes on the tree-trunks. Baffled, he would turn from his safe trail and drive down the wrong road straight into the group of grinning, triumphant men. She could hear Richard's shout of anger as he saw he was caught. With her burning eyes she could see the fight, Richard alone against twenty. The splendor of it, the desperate courage, the hopelessness. . . . And she could see Richard pitch and fall, struck down by a brutal fist, she could see his dark head dabbled in red, his beautiful face marred, his splendid body sprawled limp and moveless——

Oh, why was everything so different! Richard was hers. She only should possess him. But nothing was sure any more, nothing was certain, nothing was sure but terror.

She stood up. She lifted her arms, she stretched her slight body, as if she would stretch it into wings to shield

him. If only she could make of her body a shield, if only she could take the blows, the pain! How could she sit here in the moonlight, so still and useless and whole, when in her flesh she knew the suffering of his blows, when in her body she knew the thirst, the hunger, the deathly weariness!

Night after night she sat in her dark little room, till the blackness grew thin, translucent, and the eastern sky grew pale, cool silver. Then a deeper flame would mount the horizon and, as if wide curtains were drawn by a silent mighty Hand, that fiery splendor would pour up in a vast wave. Flame and rose, flame and rose, and then the living amber over the prairie. And down by the well the little peach-pie trees would waken and murmur among themselves as if they were wondering why they had to put up with just silky little leaves.

“Only leaves this year. But next year many blossoms and soft velvet fruit. And we know that, and we can wait.”

And then the waking voices downstairs, the happy chirp of the little boys, Twonnet’s shrill scolding, Jo Vanny’s clattering Sicilian in reply.

And before her stretched the blank misery of the coming hours. Hours to be filled, somehow, with work that must be done. Hours that would drag, and drag, and drag her with them, chained, staring. . . .

Then the little boys’ voices would swell to a joyful whoop.

“Mercy! Mercy Rose, hurry quick! Here comes Richard! Richard!”

Her foot would not touch the loft stairs, even. She did not need to take one step. For that vast prairie light had swept her away, swept her down on a flood of joy that all but drowned her. She was out of the house, she had flashed

across the yard, she was clutching Firefly's bridle before Richard could spring down. Richard, with his haggard, dirty face, and his outrageous dirty hands, and a red and black powder burn across his cheek, Richard, dog-tired, but alive and whole, and hungry as a starved wolf. He would snatch her up and shake her till her teeth chattered and give her one rough, hasty kiss, and then dash for the wash-bench and scrub his unspeakable hands, and meanwhile turn his passionately yearning gaze on the kitchen door.

"Naw, not one mouthful since we started yesterday afternoon. No, nor a drop of water. They made us step, you bet. Haul up a bucket of cold water for Firefly and me. I'm famishing. I'll drink a whole bucket myself. Sauages! Didn't I dream about 'em the whole night long? Yes, and fried potatoes, and pancakes—— Gosh! Oh, Gosh!"

And he would eat and laugh, and laugh and eat. Then with a leap he and Firefly would be off and away. And she would go blundering and stumbling through the day, so blind with ecstasy that she groped and boggled and spilled everything she touched.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THREE gods did Jo Vanny worship. And his little heart swelled with adoration at the thought of each and every one. First came Father. To Father who had saved him and his dear animals from starvation, who stood between him and the jeering Bakersfield rowdies, he lifted up his lonely little heart. For to Jo Vanny, Father held the power of life and death in his strong, kind hands.

Next to Father came Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lincoln stood by Jo Vanny exactly as he stood by everybody, thought Mercy. Mr. Lincoln was a strong tower. He was a great rock in a weary land. Always Mr. Lincoln understood. He knew even better than Father could know, how passionately Jo Vanny loved his animals, how hungrily he snatched at every word of praise for his little show. Mercy had seen Jo Vanny actually prance and strut with upblown pride, the days when Mr. Lincoln led a trail of ecstatic small boys into his battered little tent. And Mercy had seen the look on Jo Vanny's face, the night that Mr. Lincoln came home from St. Louis and brought Jo Vanny his violin.

"First I wanted to laugh. For Jo Vanny's eyes were sticking out of his head," she wrote. "And then I wanted to cry. For Jo Vanny stood there afraid to touch that fiddle, afraid to put out his hand, even. He was trembling all over, he was so scared for fear he'd wake up and find it was just a dream! At last Mr. Lincoln said, 'Come on now, Jo Vanny, it won't bite,' and he put out his poor little shaky hand and clutched it, and then he ran away as fast as he could scoot. As if he was afraid that Mr. Lincoln would snatch it back. And I haven't seen it but once, since then.

I've heard him fiddling at night, sometimes. Donny says he sleeps with it under his pillow. And Seth says he says his prayers to it."

So Mr. Lincoln was Jo Vanny's second god. And Jo Vanny loved him and revered him with a full heart. But to his third god he offered piteous libations, wrung from his sad, bewildered little soul. For his third god was Richard.

Ever since the first day Richard appeared, little Jo Vanny had looked on him with proud wonder. Richard was so tall, so strong, so breezy and assured! Richard was everything that Jo Vanny was not. Poor little Jo Vanny could only gaze and gaze and marvel. There was no taint of envy in his gentle little heart. The son of another nation might have dreamed that in time he could aspire to Richard's likeness. But not Jo Vanny. For he had a piteous wisdom. He knew how far he was from reaching Richard, how deep and wide was the gulf between them. He could only stand and wonder before him, with the puzzled wonder of a grieved yet a loyal child.

But to Father he poured out all his devotion. Inconvenient devotion it was, alas, and calculated to ruffle the temper of a saint. But Father held fast to his wavering patience. For Jo Vanny was so eager, so full of radiant faith. How could Father bear to frown on him, to hurt this tremulous little worshiper by glance or word!

"He's the very spirit of gratitude," said Father to Mercy. "He loves us all so devotedly, he never forgets for one moment what he owes us. He longs to repay a thousand times over, the little that we have done for him. He'd give his life for us, daughter."

"I know he would. I'm ashamed, Father. But if he'd only stop taking the little boys to medicine shows, and buying you those awful striped pink shirts——"

Mercy ended on a hopeless chuckle. It was Jo Vanny

who had trudged through the Bakerstown streets day after day last week, the three little boys tagging joyfully at his heels, in pursuit of an Indian medicine show; with the sad result that Thomas came home choking with croup, and Seth brought back three startling new swear-words, which earned him a spanking and a bread-and-water supper, and Donny dragged in an hour later, pale and limp from too free an indulgence in a large black sample bottle. It was Jo Vanny, armed with the seven dollars and twenty cents which were his whole months' gains, who rode into town with the neighborly Mr. Isaiah and came back loaded with gifts for his dear protectors. A sack of virulent green stick-candy for the little boys, a bunch of hair-ribbons for Mercy, a flaming brass neckchain for Aunty, and a poisonous magenta vest barred the climax.

"It's just like the medicine man's, Father," Seth sighed, in awe. "And looky the galluses he brought you. They've got a lily and a dove embroidered on 'em! Plain as day!"

"No denying it." Father's voice was a trifle dry. And Jo Vanny, pale with joy because his idol looked upon his gifts with favor, hied himself back to the Bakerstown Emporium, and added a necktie to his lavish heap. A necktie which rivaled the prairie sunsets in glory.

All these things could be endured. But when it came to the animals! True, Father had sternly forbidden Jo Vanny to bring any of his dear ones to the house. Obediently had Jo Vanny promised, only to forget by the following day. He did his few and casual chores with a monkey or so perched on his shoulder. The monkeys, growing bored, would scamper off his arm and slip into the kitchen. Aunty would find them prying into the cake-box, stealing nutmeg and ginger from the cupboard, wrenching open her preserve jars. On the momentous afternoon when Aunty was

entertaining the Bakerstown Dorcas Society, he strolled over, leading Cartouche on a piece of frazzled wire in lieu of a leash. He looped the wire over the woodshed door, then set to chopping kindling.

Cartouche caught a whiff of hot doughnut. Hopefully he followed his nose to the swept and garnished living-room where the eighteen Dorcases were enjoying light refreshments.

Ensued battle, murder and sudden death. As Aunty remarked grimly it was bad enough to be known as Abolitionists without the added ignominy of wild beast tamers.

Mercy's irritation against Jo Vanny had even a graver basis. Throughout their young lives she had labored to bring up the little boys in the strait and narrow path of the nail-brush. From infancy she had exhorted them, "If you want to amount to anything in this world, you've got to keep scrubbed. Scrub up every single day." Formerly they had given heedful ear. But along came Jo Vanny, who never scrubbed at all. And in spite of this drawback, had he not acquired a red wagon with gilt wheels, a lion, a cageful of charming monkeys? Discipline tottered on its throne.

All this annoyance came to a head on a certain Sunday morning. Jo Vanny had appeared bright and early to wash up the carryall. Cartouche had seemed ailing, so Jo Vanny had brought him along and put him on the back of the carryall while he cleaned the muddy wheels. Cartouche was drowsy. The cushions were soft. He went fast asleep. And Jo Vanny forgot him.

By this time, Button and Betsy had grown so used to the jungle odor which emanated always from Jo Vanny's raiment that when he hitched them to the carryall they merely whickered disapproval and let it go at that.

Mercy and the boys had set off early to Sabbath school.

Father and Aunty were driving in to church. Father sniffed disgustedly as he lifted Aunty into the front seat.

"On my word, I'll have to clean the carryall myself. That animal scent grows stronger and stronger every time Jo Vanny comes on the place."

Behind him, Cartouche snoozed contentedly. Many a year, during his circus days, Cartouche had slept in a jolting van, without lifting an eye-winker. But as they turned into the churchyard, he sat up and inspected his surroundings with mild interest.

But mild interest was not the emotion which greeted his appearance. Deacon Willis's aged and dignified team took one whiff, one glance: they lifted over the stake-and-rider fence like two trained hunters, the staid old chaise clattering behind them. Mr. Newbury's valuable bay ripped his halter and tried to climb the nearest sycamore. Failing in that, he galloped straight down the lane, followed by all the horses that could tear themselves loose from their hitching posts. The Bedlam that ensued brought the congregation rushing to the rescue, and broke up the service. It was nearly an hour before the frantic horses were calmed down, and Father, scarlet and fuming, had discovered the cause of the riot, and had driven Cartouche home. As he entered the barnyard, Jo Vanny rushed to seize his treasure.

"Me, I lef' heem. In back seat. I all forgot——"

"You all forgot, eh? That's more than any United Presbyterian in this county will do. For all eternity. Take that creature to your shack. The next time I catch him rambling outside your door, he stays out. So do you. And your monkeys. And everything else. I'm at the end of my rope with you."

Jo Vanny grasped that all was not well. For a week, he kept the animals in rigid bounds. Then one morning a very queer thing happened.

Jo Vanny had been told to clean the cow-shed. The shed was half a mile from his shack, and meant a full morning's work.

Now back in Jo Vanny's mind was always the dread lest, while he was away, some thief might creep in and steal Cartouche. It never occurred to him that it would take a valorous thief indeed to carry off a large elderly lion. But this fear haunted him always.

Now Father had gone to town and had taken Mercy with him. The little boys were at school. Only Aunty was in the cabin. Jo Vanny, mindful of father's ultimatum, yet decided to take a chance.

As he stood in his doorway considering, down the big road tore a small rickety covered wagon, drawn by two galloping horses. The wagon stopped below his lot. Out sprang Richard Harrison. He came racing up the lane.

Jo Vanny regarded him with solemn joy. Richard, his god, Richard the beloved of Jo Vanny's beautiful lady! Who could be more welcome?

But to-day Richard was not on pleasure bent. He stood panting and clutching into his pockets. From them he presently extracted two gleaming, gorgeous silver dollars.

"This is every cent—I've got," he gasped. "Give you more—if I had it. I've got three runaways here. The slavers are out after me, full tilt. You let the negroes hide here, then you clear out. Go over to the big house—anywhere. Ten chances to one, the hunters won't search your zoo. If they do, why—you don't know anything about them—you won't even see where I hide 'em. See?"

Jo Vanny did not see at all. He did grasp the lovely reality of those silver dollars. He observed with bewilderment the three shivering, tottering fugitives that the young man hustled indoors and crowded into the straw pile behind the monkeys' cages. These were dark people, even

darker than Twonnet and himself. But that was a small matter. What did matter was the fact that he now had an excellent excuse for keeping Cartouche with him. For who could know what base plans these strange dark people might cherish?

Away down the road tore the little covered wagon, rocking like a ship at sea. Very disposedly Jo Vanny led Cartouche to the barn and tied him up with a wisp of clothes-line.

He had just set to work when he perceived three men, all armed, coming at a gallop up to the house door. Strangers, two of them. But at sight of the third, Jo Vanny bristled a shade. The third man was not a stranger. He was Frederick Owen, whom Jo Vanny knew by most unpleasant repute—to say nothing of direct and odious personal acquaintance. On Jo Vanny's recent venture into the great world of Bakerstown, when he had driven his proud caravan into town for a lively Saturday evening, Frederick Owen had been among the rough crowd that greeted him, with deafening whoops and jeers. More heinous still, he had swung his limber cattle-whip and taken Jo Vanny's dearest monkey under the chin with a clip which brought the blood and sent the little fellow into shrieks of terror and pain. When Jo Vanny chattered protest, Frederick had merely swung the cruel little cracker and taken Jo Vanny under the chin, likewise. The crowd had yelled appreciation. Jo Vanny had crawled trembling away down a side street. His little heart was just a bubbling cup of fury. That fury seethed afresh at sight of the handsome, insolent boy.

To do Owen fair justice, he had ridden out with the slave hunters with no especial malice aforethought. Merely there was about to be some pleasing excitement at that blue-nosed editor's expense. Why not go along and see it?

But Jo Vanny took his coming very seriously indeed.

Almost as seriously as he took the appearance of the two hunters themselves.

These gentlemen had now reached the house door. One of them flung his bridle rein over the hitching post and pounded heavily on the door.

Jo Vanny looked on with interest. He saw Aunty open the door. Then at the man's first word, he saw her slam it shut. Not quite shut, for the man jammed an ample foot into the crack, and proceeded to shout at her. Loud and insulting shouts, at that.

Jo Vanny reflected. Back in his own dear Sicily he had seen the tax-collector on his too-frequent visits. This was something new for America. He did not like it at all. There was nothing he could do, for his small brittle body would not last one minute in these ruffians's hands. However, it occurred to his gentle Latin mind that Cartouche might come in handy. He stepped into the barn, untied the clothesline, and shooed Cartouche through the door.

For all his amiability, Cartouche was not quite himself that morning. Mercy had promised him some butchers' scraps from town, but the waiting had proved too long. He did not care for these men. They had not even looked his way, which was disrespectful. Their horses stood with heads drooped, snatching at mouthfuls of clover.

Suddenly one horse wheeled, quivered: then with a shriek of terror he bolted at a whirlwind gallop. The second horse followed without even waiting to shriek.

The first slave-hunter turned, and stared dizzily. If his eyes did not deceive him, a lion, a large fretful-looking lion, was standing in the barn door.

As the hunter stared, unwittingly he removed his large foot from the crack. Instantly Aunty slammed and bolted the door.

“Lemme in! For God's sake, lemme in!”

Frenziedly he pounded on the locked door. Much good that did him. Behind it, poor Aunty had dropped to the floor in a dead faint.

Cartouche was coming on, in long graceful flowing leaps, graceful as the mighty winged lions, immortal keepers of the gates of Babylon. But all that beauty of motion was lost on the hunter. Howling, he leaped for the first sanctuary in sight: the corncrib. He fell inside, just as Cartouche's huge paw struck the crib door.

Cartouche was irritated. At feeding time on the flat-boat, the men had behaved in exactly this playful manner. They would offer him a chunk of meat. Then as he grabbed for it, they would snatch it back and run gayly away. He looked around him for the second hunter.

The second hunter was stout but light on his feet. He had reached the barn ridgepole in less than it takes to tell it.

Cartouche's irritation grew. This horseplay was not to his taste. He'd stay and keep watch till they handed him his meat or know the reason why.

So he opened his massive jaws and gave a couple of coughing roars, like the rasp of a Titanic nutmeg against a colossal grater.

Now to Frederick Owen, those roars were emphatically the last straw. At their thunderous reverberation he turned distinctly green. From his perch on the barn ladder, he took one despairing glance at Cartouche: then he shot to the top rung, and plunged into the loft. He sank to his ears into the bristling deeps of the haymow.

Cartouche now sat down to await events. So did Jo Vanny.

After an hour or so, Father and Mr. Lincoln drove up. Button merely snorted, but Mr. Lincoln's Old Tom pranced and kicked and had to be escorted down the lane and pacified.

Father was furious.

"Will you look at that! I'll have to send the little scamp away. I will not tolerate this another hour."

"Steady, Stafford." Mr. Lincoln grinned. "Don't chase Cartouche off quite yet. Hasn't he treed something?"

Jo Vanny had watched their arrival. He smiled. A generous dash of humor had been included in Jo Vanny's make-up. He had enjoyed this hour hugely. As the two men tied their horses down the lane he reflected that he could now collect his lion. He strolled down the yard leading the grouchy Cartouche like a Brobdingnagian puppy on a string.

The two listened. They surveyed Exhibit A, now gibbering in the corncrib, and threatening to have the law on Father and all his kinsfolk for trainin' a savage brute to tarrify honest men out of doin' their bounden duty. They gazed up at Exhibit B, who still bestrode the ridgepole, crimson and sweating in the blazing sun and looking as foolish as any distraught fat man need ever hope to do.

Now from the kitchen came Aunty and the camphor bottle. This experience had not been funny for Aunty. Far from it. At sight of her bruised arm, her quivering old mouth, Father's face grew hard. Mr. Lincoln sucked down his upper lip. He looked like a hanging judge, resolved to mete out vengeance though the heavens fell.

"I've heard you fellows' side. Seen it, too. Strikes me this is a clear case, Mr. Stafford, of assault and battery, trespass, and a few other offenses. Here you've intimidated this lady, mistreated her as well. Further, you broke your way into another man's property—I mean corncrib——"

"Broke into the corncrib—— My gosh, and that dam' lion grabbing for my boots as I jumped in——"

"Mr. Stafford can bring very serious charges against you. You'll swear out a warrant at once, Stafford?"

“Will I? And one for murderous assault on Aunty——”

Exhibit B had heard all that he desired to hear. So had Frederick Owen, in his smothering retreat in the loft. With a despairing yell, Exhibit B scrambled down from the roof and made for the highroad. After him, full speed ahead, tore Exhibit A. And well in the rear, but taking a pace that astounded his audience, an aura of hay surrounding him like a dusty mantle, fled Frederick Owen.

“Me, I seekn they will not hurry so queek back,” remarked Jo Vanny.

“But what has become of the refugees?”

“They play wis ze monk.”

They play wis ze monk, indeed. They were crouched in the red and gilt van, cowering but safe.

—Late that night, Richard drove up in his wagon and carried the refugees away. And with him as always went Mercy’s self. All her life and sparkle, all her rapture and delight. For he held her in his hand, her life, her will. She was just a second pulse, a second breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE August days flamed by, great gilt chariots of fire. The prairie grass had turned yet a deeper emerald under the July thunderstorms that rocked the earth. Then with the passing weeks it veered to orange-tawny, to a sweep of parched and brittle gold. With the great heat that scorched there came the Fever. Not the destroyer that had laid waste the Southern country years before. This was a milder epidemic. It passed within the month. But while its time held it spelled destruction.

“The fever is sort of notional,” wrote Mercy. “It strikes hit-or-miss. Over in Cooper Township it has taken one child out of every family just like the Plague of Egypt, the terror that walketh by noonday. Here in our neighborhood nobody has had a touch even. But right over in Summer County it has wiped out one family after another. And it has taken the father and the mother from eight houses in Brandonville. Father let the paper go by and he and Mr. Lincoln waded right in and nursed the sick folks and buried the dead for ‘most a month. Then last week Mr. Lincoln bought a load of boards and Father and he put up a new shack, just boards and thatch roof alongside of Mount Everest. And we’ve taken the little Worrell children, five of them, and the Carews,—there’s only four of them, though, and Jessie and both twins are old enough to help a lot. And we’re going to keep them with us till the town meeting figures out what to do with them. The Worrells have kin back east. Poor folks, though. But the Carews haven’t one living kin. We couldn’t feed them, only all the

subscribers paid Father with the farm stuff this spring and we have about a ton of new wheat stored in the barn. Besides that the whole town is helping out. These folks may be scared, but they're good as gold down inside. Colonel Andrews drives out every week with a load of sweet corn and harvest apples and butter, and Mrs. Isaiah brings butter and eggs and always a great baking, and other folks have lent us blankets. And old Mrs. Carter jumps on her horse and comes out with two bushel baskets of sugar every single week. It certainly is lucky for us that our well never runs dry. My, but we use up gallons and gallons every day!

"Father and Mr. Lincoln put up a long board table with benches outside for us all to eat on. We can't get all the children into the house at once. Yes, and Mr. Lincoln bought us a new cow so's we could have plenty of milk, and he never comes out without bringing a ham, or a whole leg of beef, or maybe a roasting pig. It keeps me on the jump, cooking. But it is lots of fun to have them all here.

"Aunty made up four gallons of thieves' vinegar for each of us to take a wineglass full each day. That was to keep us from catching the fever. But it had spice and molasses in it, so the little boys gobbled it all up inside of a week.

"I suppose the Worrell's kin will be bound to have them, but I hope we can keep the Carews always, they are such duckies.

"The little boys are pleased to pieces for they think an Epidemic is a sort of picnic, because the children are here and we eat outdoors and drink out of tin cups. Mr. Lincoln bought them in Springfield, because he knew I wouldn't have dishes enough. He came banging and clattering out on Old Tom with a string of cups hung over one shoulder and an elegant new skillet slung on his back, just like a peddler. Mr. Lincoln is the grandest neighbor

we've got. Aunty used to say he didn't pretty up much, but Father always told her he was a singed cat, and more to him than meets the eye. And Father was right. Last week, he got paid up for a tremendous big patent case he won for some folks in Cincinnati. He got the biggest fee I ever heard tell of. Ninety-five dollars and fifty cents. And didn't he come tearing out from town with a great big roasting over-coat on his arm. He says, while he was away in Cincinnati there was a tailors' sale of men's clothes, and Mrs. Lincoln went down and bought him this overcoat, and she got the biggest one she could find. But it nips him through the chest and climbs his back so he darsn't flap his arms or he'll split, and he feels like a rooster with his wings clipped. He asked Father to take it off his hands. And Father just hooted, but Aunty felt of the cloth, and then made him try it on. And it fitted just like his old one used to. (He bought that the winter before Donny was born. He nearly froze in it last winter, too.) So finally he said, 'How much is the confounded thing?' and Mr. Lincoln put on that Meeky-Moses look of his, and said, 'Five dollars and fifty cents.' Aunty says, 'It is the best kersey. At that price it is not a bad bargain.' And Father said, 'I don't believe in hanging all my perishing riches on my mortal frame, but it will come in handy next winter,' so Mr. Lincoln took his note for it, and he rode off looking pleased as Punch. Father always looks elegant, but come winter time, when he puts on that coat and his best morocco boots, he will look like Lord Byron in *The Corsair*. Poor Mr. Lincoln in that big gray granny-shawl of his will be simply pitiful beside him.

"Yesterday, Father needed me in the office, so I went to town for all day. Frederick Owen came into the office and hung around, but I was doing handbills and paid him no attention. I was scared, though, because Father was out, and

Frederick always scares me, I do not know why. Finally he said, 'Will you not go to the Baptist picnic with me,' and I told him I was not a Baptist; and then he tried to be funny and said, 'You can eat fried chicken without being immersed,' but I considered that that was sacreligious, so I said nothing. Then he reached inside the top of his patent-leather boot and got out a little dirk, a beauty, with a chased handle, all gold and steel, and the blade chased, too, and he said 'This came from Seville and it is the finest blade money can buy.' And he began whittling at the office wall. I pretended not to notice what he was doing, but I was so curious I thought I would burst and finally I said, 'Would you please not to deface our office wall?' He laughed and said, 'Do you call it defacing, to carve your lovely name on it, forever,' and I looked, and here he had drawn a heart and was cutting our initials inside, F. and M. That made me so mad I forgot I was scared and a lady and a Presbyterian, and I grabbed up a ruler, and knocked the knife out of his hand. He tried to laugh but he was firing mad inside, and he said, 'Oh, all right, Beauty, I was only carving it so you would have it to remember me by, but I will carve it yet. Carve it some place where you never can forget.' And right then Father came in, and he looked Frederick up and down, the way he does when he's angry. Then his voice got velvety and he said, 'I fear my little daughter is trespassing on your time, Mr. Owen. We must not allow her to do that for you are a busy man. A very busy man, and undoubtedly needed in your own place of occupation.' And he picked up Frederick Owen's elegant white beaver hat by the rim and stuck it out at him as far as he could reach, as if it was Thomas's dead mouse, and kept on looking at him. If Father ever looked at me like that I would not wait to die. I would curl right up like a caterpillar. Frederick Owen did not shrivel, but he kind of

squirmed, and said, 'I must be going, Miss Mercy. My invitation is still at your disposal.' And then Father got perfectly white, and he said, 'We appreciate your invitations, Sir, but my daughter's time is permanently engaged.' And Frederick opened his mouth and started to say something but Father just kept on looking at him, and he squirmed some more and finally went away. Then Father set to writing, but he broke the two nice quills I had sharpened for him and finally he said, 'If that yellow Cur speaks to you again I will attend to him,' and I said, 'Yes, Sir.' But that was not a promise, for I shall be very cautious about telling Father if F. Owen should have the Brass to speak to me again. For that dirk can cut, in spite of all the engraving on it. And as soon as Father went out, I found some sandpaper and rubbed his silly carving off, for if Father ever saw it he would certainly have a Gimini fit.

"We tried to bring Mr. Lincoln home to supper, but he said, 'Not to-night, for I am as busy as a little dog in high oats. I have found a book that tells how to play chess and I intend to devote myself to its perusal until I can massacre your respected father in cold blood.' But he could learn it fast enough by playing with Father, only they get to talking anti-slavery, and then they get so spunky one of them is sure to knock the board down and spill everything.

"Mrs. Isaiah invited Aunty to come over to her garden and pick out seedlings and roots and things to plant in our own garden for next spring. So Aunty went, and she came back with her arms full. But what do you suppose was the very first thing she planted! *Bergamot!*

"To-day the stage brought a letter from Rich. He says he is coming soon, for he is sick and tired of kissing Mrs. Lot, and she is so tired of him that whenever she sees him coming she runs out a rock salt tongue."

Up the lane tore Button. Mr. Stafford swung down, hurried into the cabin. Adoniram jumped up eagerly.

"Hullo, Father. Why, where's Mr. Lincoln? You said he was coming out to-day."

"Mr. Lincoln will not come out for some time, Donny."

"Why not? Is he sick?"

"No. But there is sickness in the family."

"Who?"

"Don't ask so many questions, son."

Adoniram subsided. Mr. Stafford went into the kitchen, and closed the door.

"Aunty, I have bad news for you. Mr. Lincoln's youngest boy is very sick."

Aunty rose up and seized her bonnet and shawl.

"No, they don't need you. Half Springfield is there now, trying to help. I'm going to sit up with them to-night. I-I don't believe there is much hope. I put the *Clarion* into shape this afternoon. If I can't get home to-morrow, Mercy and Jo Vanny can get it out for me. Got to hurry now."

He was off, at tearing speed.

He did not come back until supper-time, next day. When he did come, he said nothing. He sat in the chimney-corner, tired, silent. He would not let the little boys out of his sight. He kept pulling Thomas up to him, holding him tight against his booted knee.

Later he spoke briefly to Aunty.

"He can't talk to anybody yet. I wouldn't know what to say to him, for that matter. If it was one of my own—if it was Mercy!"

He broke off, staring at the wall. After supper, he went up to the loft. He sat where he could keep close watch on those three sturdy armfuls of sleep.

A week later, court opened its fall session. On his way

to the court-house Mr. Lincoln would ride down the short cut, just below the big hickory tree. So many times, he had ridden that way. Aunty often said she could set her clock by him, her calendar, too.

To-day she planned, quietly. Father had gone to town early. The little boys were in school. She sent Mercy to Mrs. Isaiah's on an errand.

Then she sat down by the open door. She sat there a good while. Her keen old eyes watched the road.

Presently she saw Mr. Lincoln approaching. His big gaunt body hung limp in the saddle. He was all weariness. Tired body, beaten soul.

Aunty hurried spryly down the lane.

"Morning, Mr. Lincoln. 'Light and come in. I've been waiting for you."

He stopped his horse. He looked around him dazed and blank. Perhaps he would not have stopped for any other human being. But he could not refuse Aunty. He lunged off his horse. The face he bent to her was the face of a man dying with thirst.

"I don't want to see anybody." He spoke at last, with a dry tongue.

"Nobody's here but me. Come in."

She led him in. He followed stupidly, as if he must grope his way.

Aunty sat down. She waited. After a while, he spoke.

"Reckon it's just as I told you." He looked down at her dully. "Reckon I'm a failure. A failure in everything. I couldn't even keep my little son alive."

"I know how it is." Aunty spoke under her breath. "You can't talk about it to your wife for she can't bear it. You can't talk about it to other folks, for they don't know one thing about it. But I'm 'most eighty, and I do know." She

leaned to him, she put out mother-arms, this old, old woman who had never borne a child. "I know all about it. You can tell me."

They sat there a long time, the worn indomitable old woman, the big gangling defeated man, on his knees by her chair, his gaunt head buried on her caved old breast.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

AUGUST, September, October—— No, it wasn't possible that autumn could come so soon. To count the racing weeks, the flying days, made Mercy dizzy. In March she had gone to Antioch, she had met Richard. In May he had traveled all the way to Illinois to see her just for those few days. That trip had cost him, as she well knew, every cent that he had earned in the two months preceding. In July, he had come again, and they had celebrated the day with the prairie fire. Then came two long months with only Richard's letters to keep life in her. His last visit in early September had been just a hurried glimpse of each other snatched from one of Richard's Underground journeys. He had dared stay less than a day. That day their guardian angel had conspired to hold inviolate, their very own.

But that was four weeks ago. Five weeks. Five weeks and three days to be exact. And now Richard was coming to-morrow! Twenty more hours to wait. Sixteen more. Only twelve more hours and eighteen minutes!

Richard had come. Thinner than ever from his double tasks of driving by night and surveying whenever he could get a job at it by day. Haggard, dog-tired, uproariously joyful to see her, as racketty and teasing as all three little brothers put together. That was the first two minutes of him. Two minutes more and all that uproar was silenced and he was her man, her young grave lover, his gaunt weary eyes on her, clinging to her, as if the very sight of her was food and drink and rest. Another breath; and again he was the eager boastful teasing little boy.

“Daren’t spend but this one day with you, young lady.

But we're going to have one glorious time of it. Didn't notice, what I'd brought along, did you? Girl, all over. Careless piece, you are. Never had eyes for anything but me. Well, I'll overlook your heedlessness this once. Look, now."

At the hitching rack stood a smart high gig. Harnessed to it was a stunning black team, the finest horses in Bakers-town.

"Old Currier's team. He let me hire them for this afternoon as a special favor. No, this trip, we do not take the little boys along. Nor Aunty. Nor even Cartouche. Understand that?"

Now to go riding publicly with your suitor was equivalent to announcing your engagement.

"But, Richard——"

"There aren't any Buts. Come on."

Only Mercy herself could tell the story of that afternoon. Even her hand and pen must fall far short.

"Back east, once in a coon's age, I used to go riding with Lemuel or Eliphilet or Amariah, with some of their aunts, cousins, etc., along. But this ride was different. It was the most elegant experience I ever expect to have, and also it became quite exciting along towards the end. I mean after we met Frederick Owen and his twin. But in the beginning it was just wonderful, that's all I can say. I had on my blue velvet bonnet that Aunty made over this fall, and Richard had some new boots and a light blue neckerchief, with polka dots on it just the shade of my bonnet, which was a very singular coincidence. I thought we would both talk every minute, for we had so much to tell each other about, but neither of us said one word, till we had gone away past Tuckerman's woods, up the little hill.

“There Richard stopped the horses, and hunted in his pockets till he found a little gold box, and he opened it and there was the most beautiful ruby ring. And he said, ‘I wrote to Guardy and told him that I couldn’t force him to give me my money, but that he’d got to send me my mother’s betrothal ring. My father had given it to her because she was the only girl in the world for him, and now I wanted to give it to the only girl in the world for me. So put up your hand, Mercy.’ Then I felt like Jezebel and Sapphira because I have never yet told him the exact truth about Lemuel G. Crowther and his hateful old lost letter concerning which I do not know to this day what he wrote in it. So I began to cry, I could not help it. I felt so guilty and yet I was mad enough to bite Lemuel’s head off.

“Richard took hold of my hand and put the ring on and kissed it to make it stay always. Then I cried harder than ever, because I knew I was not being honorable to accept it before I had absolutely broken with Lemuel and yet it looked so magnificent I could not bear to take it off.

“Richard said, ‘Why do you cry, you darling, am I such a tough prospect as all that?’ And that made me laugh, which was worse yet.

“Then Richard said ‘Stop shaking and blow your nose and kiss me back, you stingy, and tell me what is the matter. I am beginning to think this is not a joke. Are you still grieving over that big sawney back east.’ Then he began to look so black and stern, and I had just started to tell him that Lemuel meant nothing in my life when up the hill comes the two Owens in the most genteel new chaise with maroon cushions, both dressed up like new sixpences and more drunk than usual. They drove right alongside

and cramped their rig so we could not pass without sliding down into a deep gully.

"I whispered to Richard to get away, quick, for while I do not consider myself a Coward, yet I am so scared of both Owens that whenever I meet them it makes me kind of blind and sick. So Richard spoke civilly and said, 'Will you kindly let us pass?' But Frederick Owen yelled out, 'Why, here is our Beauty, Beauty and the Beast!' And Simeon says, 'Not in a thousand years will we let you pass. What have you been doing to her, you great lout, to make her cry,' and Richard told him, 'None of your business,' and tried to scourge the horses past.

"Then they both hollered at him, and swore, and I called to please let us by, but Frederick Owen, the big booby, sings out: 'You are a brave girl, Beauty, to shield this yellow Cur, but we will not see you mistreated, so we will rescue you.' Only he hiccuped so much it was hard to make sure what he was saying.

"By now Richard was getting red around his jawbones, and I knew what that meant. But he was trying to get away peacably, just the same, and we would have slipped off all right, only for that dumb Frederick. Didn't he give his team a slash, and then jumped sidewise, and shoved us right off the edge of the high bank down into the gully!

"It was the favor of Providence that we did not upset. Instead, we went pitching and sliding down the hill till we stuck, rig and all, in the hazel brush at the bottom. Of course our horses tried to bolt, but Richard snatched me out and then quieted them down.

"If the Owens had had any sense, they would have lit out for home after playing such a hateful trick. But instead, they jumped out and ran to the edge of the gully and screeched down and made rude sport of Richard and

told him he had better drive oxen, not horses, after this. Then Richard got perfectly scarlet, and he said, 'Get into our rig, Mercy, and take the reins and I will lead the horses back to the road,' which he did. Then he took our hitching strap, and went to the Owens.

"They were sitting there on the bank laughing fit to kill, and Richard did not say one word. He grabbed them both and knocked their heads together and then jammed their heads under his left arm, and tipped them over his knee, both at once, and sailed in with the strap. I was frightened 'most to death, for they were so surprised and furious, and they kept kicking and biting and swearing. But they could not get any grip on Richard anywhere, for they were too drunk, and the more they flapped and lunged at him the better licks Richard got in.

"Finally Simeon began to holler 'Enough' and then Richard tipped them back on their feet and slapped their faces for them and said, 'The next time, gentlemen, that you honor us by your interference, you will get a real thrashing, not an imitation.' Then he hoisted them back into their chaise, and slapped their faces again for luck, so loud you heard the crack, and gave their team a cut and away they went, kiting. Then he came back to me, and told me I was a lovely silly to look so pale, and he was so pleased I guess he forgot he was just as good as engaged to me, and he whistled all the way home.

"I feel very proud of Richard, not just because he whaled both the Owens but because he is proving such a successful business man. He has a job all the time now, surveying. Then he drives for the Underground, nights, whenever they want him, and that is 'most all the time, for they are hurrying runaways north, before the cold weather sets in. If he drives all night, they pay him a dollar for the trip, and give

him two bits besides, to buy his breakfast. Times when he has to drive all night and all the next day, stopping only for fresh horses, they sometimes give him as much as two-fifty. That is wonderful pay. Of course it is risky, for every once in a while he is chased and they fire on him, but usually he manages to dodge. I told him I would not stay engaged to him however unless he promised to carry plenty of cartridges and some dry socks.

“Mr. Lincoln gave him a letter to some friends and asked them to give him that surveying position, that is the way he got it. He feels very much obliged for the letter, and so do I. But Mr. Lincoln says that driving nights for the Underground and carrying chain all day is what he would call a land-office job.

“Richard and Father are very different. Father wants to free the slaves, and he worries about them all the time. Richard wishes to free the slaves, too, but he wants some excitement while he is doing it. And he does not worry over them. Not Richard.

“I am almost thankful he had to go right away. If I know the Owens, they will go and get sober just for spite, on purpose to take revenge. I could hardly let him go, though, and first he made fun of me and then he told me that if the little boys were not around he would tell me what I really mean to him. But of course the little boys were around every minute. So was the Captain. And Twon-net. And Aunty. So Richard did not tell me then. I do hope he does not forget to write it.

“If I cannot get things straightened out with Lemuel I believe I shall die. I cannot bear it. I never supposed I would live to do anything so shameful as to have an understanding with one man, right when I am engaged forever to another. I keep putting the ruby ring on and then taking it off and putting on the carnelian one. I used to think the

carnelian was perfectly elegant, but now I wish Lemuel had kept it himself and given it to the first Academy girl who chased him up a tree.

"The only thing I can do is to write Lemuel and tell him that if it is all the same to him I wish to release him from his promise. I shall send back his ring, too. Though I certainly hesitate to do so until I have a reply from Lemuel to my letter. I do not wish to shock him too severely. Poor boy, I know this will hurt him terribly. But it is dishonest to keep him longer in Suspense."

Early the next day, Mercy sat down to her Herculean task. She wasted sheets on sheets of her best note-paper, she chewed her own pen to pulp, then began on Father's with disastrous results. But at last the fatal letter was written. She surveyed it with a certain justifiable pride. Surely its tactful phrases would all but atone for the grief it must inflict.

She carried it to the Corners postoffice at once. She had just reached home when the little boys pelted in. Adoniram was shining.

"I'm promoted," he announced loftily. "And I got to have new schoolbooks. I want fifty cents to buy me a Colburn's *Mental*."

"Why, Donny, that's fine. But you can have my old Colburn's *Mental*. It's upstairs in Aunty's little trunk. I've never touched it since I left Antioch."

"Fine!" Donny pranced as she lifted it from the little trunk. "And I'll use these papers for bookmarks. This letter anyhow."

"What letter?"

"Why, this big fat one. How funny! You've never opened it."

Mercy caught the letter from his hand. A pale blue envelope, still faintly odorous of bergamot.

"My gracious sakes alive!" She tore it open with the speed of light.

*"Green River, Massachusetts.
March tenth.*

"RESPECTED FRIEND:

"Dear Mercy: I write this with some Apprehension, as I do not just know how you are going to take what I will say. You must be aware that I think of you with the highest Regard. I have considered you as my affianced Wife, and you will agree that I have thus acted in bestowing upon you my attentions, viz., letters, gifts, valentine, ring, etc., etc. But I have this to say. As you will recall, my father bought from your father's property the pastures and the woodlot. These border right on the land bought by Mr. Jedediah N. Perkins, the Pa of your friend Lucinda Perkins. After thinking it over I find that I prefer to remain here in Green River rather than to go West, as was first intended. Now I write to ask, Do you still think favorably of my suit? If so, I wish to tell everybody and to do so at once. They all pick on me because they say I was too slow and choosy, and you gave me the Slip. If I could once tell them you are engaged to me, they would shut their Trap. But as it is, between the folks at home nagging and the Academy girls always asking me to parties and then saying right out that they know they are safe in so doing because I never accept, a fellow feels like a fool.

"If you wish to keep things as they stand, then all right. But if you should feel that your affections are growing cold, then notify me at once.

"I have seen a good deal of Lucinda since your departure. I consider her a perfect woman, nobly planned. To

warn to comfort and command. She already has a right smart of property, and since her pa has bought your pa's woods and pasture it almost seems like a leading.

"I remain as always

"Yours with deepest respect and with

"Heart-whole Devotion,

LEMUEL G. CROWTHER.

"P.S. If you do not care for my ring any longer, do not feel that you have got to keep it. It cost \$1.50 at the Post-office Store. You can send it back in a letter. It may cost as much as 10¢ to return it to me, so I am inclosing 12¢ for postage."

Mercy flashed down the loft ladder, seized her bonnet and cape.

"My letter to Lemuel! Oh, oh, the stage is due at the Corners, this minute! Oh, if I can just get there in time to snatch it back!"

It was two miles to the postoffice. Long rutted miles, at that. Mercy raced down that road like a mad thing. Behind her shrieked a trail of astonished little brothers. Gasp-ing, crimson, she tore into the little crossroads store.

"My letter, my letter! Give it to me. Quick!

"Why, I put her into the mailbag, not ten minutes ago. And here's the stage, right now. Didn't you want her to go?"

"Open that mailbag! Hurry!"

"Hey, listen, Miss Mercy. Ain't I just locked her and stuck some red gov'ment sealing wax on her? She's Federal property, now. I dassent——"

Mercy's eye caught the store carving knife, adapted genially to every purpose from slicing bacon to whittling plug tobacco. She caught it up, cut the mailbag cords,

groped frantically in. The postmaster stood by, uncertain whether to interfere. But she had jerked out her own letter and was re-tying the cords before he could put his protest into further words.

The stage halted with a flourish, a yell of command. "Hustle with that mail! We're late, now."

Mercy hurried. She seized on the sealing wax, still warm, dabbed on a splash, and tossed the bag to the driver. The coach pelted away.

Late that night, she awoke. She felt as if the burden of Atlas had rolled from her shoulders. Heaven be thanked, she had not played fast and loose with Lemuel's young affections. As a matter of fact it was Lemuel who had played fast and loose with her own. She reached over to Thomas's cot to make sure he was safely tucked in.

"Awake, Thomas?"

Thomas emitted an unsociable grunt.

"Because, if you are, I've got a secret to tell you. I've been jilted. And I'll wager there never was a jilted woman in all the world, who enjoyed it as much as I do."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

NOVEMBER, December, Mercy carried those days like a brimming cup. Not another drop of joy could you pour into that cup.

“I have the grandest news to write tonight. Father brought another long letter from Rich. He says he is now getting \$14 a week, and saving \$11 every single payday. If he can keep this job till next June he will have two hundred dollars. Then we can get married, for that will pay half on our farm and leave us something for stock, tools, etc. All Rich needs, he says, is a new suit. As for me, I do not need any clothes for I have plenty to make over. Only I do want to have my best shoes half-soled. And my heart is set on a wedding bonnet, like Mrs. Isaiah’s. She wore it over here the other day to show it to us. It was 18 years old last May. It is white velvet with long white plumes, and it has a peach velvet follow-me-lad. She has worn it just 5 times and there is not one speck on it except where her oldest boy chewed the follow-me-lad, and she tried to clean it with lye soap. I thought it was dreadful and Aunty said Nobody but a Ninkum would ever try to clean peach velvet with lye soap. However I can get married without a bride’s bonnet if it is necessary.

“Besides Rich’s letter, Father brought one from Lucinda. She put in one of her wedding invitations, for she and Lemuel expect to get married on the fifteenth. It is purple cardboard with a gilt Cupid holding two hearts in the corner, tied with blue ribbon. It is perfectly elegant. She

also sent me a piece of her wedding dress. It is white lute-string, and looks rich and dignified, but Aunty says it is as sleazy a piece as she ever laid eyes on.

"Father came home late so shaky and sick he could not eat any supper. He says that he is certain that President Pierce will sign the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. He believes that if he does it will mean the destruction of the Union.

"Richard says he is wearing his winter flannels, because I told him he had got to, but I think he is telling a falsehood, because in the last letter before this he said these suits were so scratchy, he would as lieve turn into a porcupine and be done with it. I certainly am thankful that she got Lemuel and not me.

"I am beginning to think that Mr. Lincoln is the kindest human being that ever drew breath, but I wonder sometimes where he expects to finish up, he is such a perfectly terrible liar. Father took me to Springfield last week and I was in a store trading when along came Mrs. Lincoln. I said to her, how pleased I was because Mr. Lincoln gave Father a chance to buy that elegant overcoat for 'most nothing, and Mrs. Lincoln opened her eyes wide and said, 'Overcoat, what overcoat?' And I said, 'The one you bought for him,' and Mrs. Lincoln said, 'Child, are you crazy? I never bought Abraham Lincoln a coat in all my days. Why he could not squeeze into a boughten overcoat to save his soul.' So I tried to squirm out of it, but I did not squirm any too well and when I went away she was still looking after me in a very singular manner. Of course I know now what he was up to. He bought that overcoat for Father on purpose, because the old one was just falling off him. But Father never guessed. And while I do not believe in overlooking such a whopper I am going to keep my mouth shut."

Event crowded on event. One bitter November night, Mercy pulled Thomas inside the red comforter with her to serve as a footstove while she should chronicle the latest absorbing crisis.

“Out here, things never do quit happening. To-day, right in the midst of the biggest snowstorm of the year, we had company come. The most genteel company that ever stepped inside our door. Miss Evelina Amberley!

“We never dreamed she was coming. First thing we knew, the stage came up our lane and the driver swung down and made the grandest flourishes, and then he lifted down two trunks and about eight band-boxes, and then handed out a lady. She was all in black velvet, a long sweeping pelisse and a wide black hat, all plumes, and then a great soft ermine coat.

“But the minute we saw her face, we all forgot how beautiful and stately she was, and we just fell on her and ate her up. She did not seem to mind, not one bit. She hugged and kissed us all as if she never would stop.

“We were all so glad to have her. All but Father. He was glad to see her of course, but he was sort of horrified, too. He put his arms around her and he said, ‘My child, what of your own father?’ And she shrugged a little and said, ‘By this time he understands.’ And she looked up into Father’s face, and said, ‘You won’t send me back? You will let me stay?’ And Father said, ‘This is your home, until you choose another,’ and she put her head on his shoulder and did not say another word.

“There is something very peculiar about the whole thing, I can see that. I know she has told Aunty something, for Aunty pets her all the time, and calls her My Lamb, and goodness knows she hasn’t called any of us My Lamb for years and years, except Thomas. And not even Thomas

nowadays. Not since the time he and the poor old captain spilled Cyrus into the brook instead of the water-bucket.

"It surely is grand to have Miss Evelina here, and she is the happiest thing you ever laid eyes on. She wants to help every minute. Of course she doesn't know how to do anything, really, for she has never so much as milked and the only things she knows how to cook are pound cake and quince tarts and marzipan. But she tries so hard. She even offers to wash the dishes, even though Mr. Lincoln won't."

"I don't know that we will have much Christmas this year, but I do know I shall make popcorn balls for the little boys and embroider some very elegant handkerchiefs for Richard. Aunty gave me a roll of linen she'd had saved up for years, and I shall hem it and then put R.H. in the corners with seed stitches to touch it up. I shall make him some popcorn balls, too."

The days grew short and dark and cold. The last wild geese practiced their airy Spencerian V's across the sullen sky. To Father this autumn spelled increasing anxiety long drawn out. Not one word had come from Joel. He had vanished utterly from the earth. Guarded messages came from Mr. Emerson, telling that the tiny sums Father squeezed out and forwarded to him were applied on Joel's debt to the bank exactly as he had directed. Except the dollar or so that was sent on to Joel himself. But for any acknowledgment that came those hard-won dollars might have been thrown into the sea.

The *Clarion* dragged along as usual. It earned a dollar or so a week, it brought in occasional baskets of vegetables or loads of wood. The articles Father wrote for Mr. Greeley and for the Eastern magazines did better. You could count on them to pay as much as eight or ten dollars,

and that was a great help. But daily Father grew older, more bitterly quiet. Joel, his brother, his Benjamin! How did life fare with him? Would there ever be word of him again?

But to Mercy everything was so different! Winter was not winter any more. Its days sped by in crystal sunlight, its nights went robed in stars. To Father this might be a desolate lonely country far on the edge of the world. To her it spelled enchantment. Here, anything could happen. Even in this bitter chill, her beauty, always so folded and so shy, had flamed awake. She sped through the gray weeks a creature transformed. Her father would stare at her as if the very look of her could light his darkening hours. The little boys clung tighter to their sister. Even Aunty, that dry and brittle branch, leaned to her now with an added gentleness. Love walked with her, and the love of others went out to her and blessed her unawares.

Twonnet was still a problem, although she was learning to help, after her fashion. Contrary forever, she soon took to doing the milking, not only for themselves, but for the feeble old Tuckermans, their neighbors, and for a wonder, did it fairly well. Sometimes, too, she went to work in village households when extra help was needed. But for the most part she played with the little boys or sat in her tepee day on day. Yes, Twonnet was still a problem. But as Father had said of her, of the Captain, of Jo Vanny, "If we don't take care of them, who under the sun ever will? And of course we can't turn them away."

In the winter the Captain slipped away. He sat by the hearth as usual that day, always so tranquil, always drowsily content. Late in the afternoon Seth tore in waving his report card. For once in its harried existence that card was adorned with amazingly high marks. Seth, jubilant, pounced

on the old man, waving the card like a banner of victory.

"Looky my report, everybody! Look, Aunty! Say, why doesn't the Captain wake up and see it too?"

Aunty laid her fingers on the shriveled old wrist. Then she spoke, very gentle.

"Never mind waking him, Seth. Well . . . I'm thankful we kept him warm and comfortable, long's we could."

The long suspense for Joel had told heavily on Father. But hardly less than his fear for Joel was his black prescience for his nation. The shadow of that vast approaching conflict lay always upon him the while his own helplessness rasped him, shamed him. He had dared believe that he could do effective work against slavery, that he could build of his own life a center of service for liberty. Poor fool! Not one man had listened to him. Not one man had pledged himself to stand by. Even Mr. Lincoln, whose devoted friendship meant half of life to him, refused to agree, refused to comprehend.

"Maybe Mr. Lincoln is too old, too tired," he thought bitterly. "Well, I'm too old, too tired myself to struggle any longer."

But he struggled on. Resolve to give up? He might as well resolve to give up breathing.

Into his arguments nowadays there crept a certain asperity. Up to this time he had thought himself a model of forbearance. But now his sensitiveness, the vehemence of his beliefs, his inborn arrogance, the arrogance made up of pride of birth and pride of principle, all worked against him. Mr. Lincoln knew this and gauged it wisely; still more wisely, he tried always to temper the wind of Mr. Stafford's discourse to the outraged flock of subscribers who wanted less sass, by gorry, less interference with their own opinions, and more willingness to grant free speech and thought, all the gol-durned Abolitionists in creation to

the contrary notwithstanding. Profoundly kind, he had tried from the first to make the *Clarion* office a common meeting place for the town; to bring the citizens together in a spirit of friendly discussion, not of vindictive wrangling. But now it seemed as if all his efforts were worse than useless.

"Father and Mr. Lincoln were getting more fussy and snippy and snarly than the little boys ever were. Not even when they had the mumps," wrote Mercy in her diary. "One comfort. No matter how hard they quarrel they manage to make it up afterwards. But no telling how long they will make up. Mr. Lincoln was here to supper, and we had apple dumplings with hard sauce, and right in the middle of his dessert Father flared up and said, 'Why are you not going to the Abolition Convention? Do you realize that you are shirking your sacred duty?' And Mr. Lincoln stopped with his mouth full and said, 'Stafford, I love you like a brother, but if you halt me in the midst of this dumpling all will be at an end between us.'

"Father was cross and tired, I guess, and for once in his life he could not take a joke. He put down his spoon, and his stock rared clear past his ear, and he said, 'Is this an hour for jesting when your nation's honor is at stake?' And Mr. Lincoln reached for the hard sauce and said, 'Even a condemned criminal is permitted to finish his breakfast before he mounts the scaffold.'

"Then Seth began to laugh. Poor Seth, he always manages to laugh in the wrong place. Father said, 'You may leave the table,' and Seth went, though he was only half-way through his dumpling, but I hid it for him afterwards, so the other two would not get it.

"Mr. Lincoln tried to mollify Father, and said, 'A man in my position has to go slow, Stafford. You know that I

believe slavery is an evil. But while the law stands we must obey that law. We will gain nothing by repudiating our deepest obligation. Further, I am not yet convinced that abolition measures are the best road out of slavery.' And Father said, 'For that matter, are you possessed of any convictions whatever? Do you desire to lift your country out of this pit of shame? Or are you governed by a base expediency? It would look to me, Mr. Lincoln, that you would hold with the hare yet run with the hounds.'

"That was too bad of Father, for I know it cut Mr. Lincoln to the quick. He jumped up and pushed back his dumpling, and first he tried to joke it off, and said, 'Looky here, Stafford, leave enough hide on me to remember me by. Isn't a man's soul his own?' And Father said, 'Not when his nation demands that soul and he withholds it.'

"Then they surely did have it hot and heavy. Finally they were both so fighting mad they couldn't speak, and Mr. Lincoln marched out of the house and banged the door and Father said, 'Just what I might have expected. Well, here is an end to that false friendship.'

"But yesterday Mr. Lincoln came sneaking in when he knew Father had gone to town. And he pitched in and sawed about a million sticks of wood. But Father came home earlier than usual and caught him stacking the wood in the shed. They stood there and looked at each other and both looked sort of sheepish and finally Father said, 'If you will come in and eat supper with us, Mr. Lincoln, I promise that I will not say one word that begins with S.' And Mr. Lincoln said, 'I will not only eat supper with you, you sanctimonious blue-nosed nigger-stealer, but I will play chess with you afterwards and I will whale the everlasting day-lights out of you. Darned if I won't. (Only he did not say Darn. But it was Providential Aunty was in the kitchen, and did not hear just what he did say.) So he stayed the

night and they had a grand time, and Mr. Lincoln was so happy he sang every word of *Oh, Why Should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud*, twice over.

"Father says that Congress is deciding whether they will make Kansas free territory. They are arguing about it all the time. Adoniram asked him did Congressmen get any pay, and Father said, 'Yes, they are paid by the Government every day no matter whether they succeed in settling this question righteously or not.' I think it is sinful for the Government to throw away money like that. Besides if Kansas had one mite of sprawl she would make up her own mind whether to be slave or free, no matter what other folks said."

Late one raw February day Mercy sat in her loft trying to write. The three small boys tumbled over her like so many puppies. Overgrown puppies at that. She gazed on them with a fond dismay. What could possess little boys to grow up so amazingly fast? They not only shot up, they shot down, like so many onion sprouts. Their pantaloons leaped above small bony shins, their wrists distanced their roundabout sleeves by half a length, their jackets cracked at the seams and squeejowed in the back. Thomas was bidding farewell to his baby teeth, leaving a mournful pink expanse. Seth had split out of his spandy new suit like an active young tadpole. Adoniram had grown so tall that you could get only a small portion of him on your lap at a time, even when he had a lonesome streak. But happily, lonesome streaks were few and far between.

"Anyway, they all suit me. And I suppose the quicker they grow up, the better," she reflected. "Besides that, I'm too thankful that they are all taking after Father, every day. For I don't want them to take after Uncle Joel. I love Uncle Joel, I'll love him always. But——"

Mercy was growing up, too. Growing up to understand certain matters that had been mysterious before.

A few days later she wrote:

"You never could guess what happened today. Uncle Joel came back! Just for a few hours. But my, how thankful we all were to see him alive again! 'Specially Father. I never knew till now just what has worried Father so much. But I do know now. It's because Uncle Joel has never grown up. But maybe he will now. Now that Miss Evelina has said what she did. No telling . . .

"He came just as he always does. He did not send one word ahead. Only it was all different. For one thing he didn't come prancing up on horseback the way he always used to. He was on foot and the roads were all glare ice, so he had tied some old bits of carpet over his shoes to keep him from falling. His shoes really didn't amount to much for they were all split over the instep, and the soles torn half off besides. And he looked terribly thin and sort of out of breath. But he was as swinging and gay as ever. He grabbed us all up and kissed us. He didn't jerk a lot of presents out of his overcoat pockets like he always used to. He didn't have any pockets to jerk from. He didn't have any overcoat.

"Father was in his room, writing, when the boys came in, whooping that Uncle Joel had come. Father came out and stood and looked at him, just a minute. Then he put his arm around Joel, as if he wasn't any bigger than little Thomas, and pulled him away, into his own room.

"They didn't come out for a good while. When they did come he had on Father's good heavy suit, and he'd had a scrub and a shave and he was all smartened up. But you could see how thin he was and how tired. I never did see anybody so tired. Mrs. Isaiah had sent us some prairie

chickens, and I had made a pie, and Uncle Joel used to love chicken pie, but this time he wouldn't eat for a long while. Finally he pitched in and ate as if he was half starved. He didn't talk at all, though. And Father never took his eyes off him.

"Then they went back to the study and talked a long time. Finally they came out and Uncle Joel said he must be going, but Father said, 'Joel boy! Wait! I hadn't realized, you have no overcoat.'

"Uncle Joel kind of laughed, and said, 'Oh, I manage all right, without.' But Father went straight back to his room and came out with his own grand new one.

"Uncle Joel looked at it. He got awfully red, and he sort of trembled all over. But Father said, 'Come now, Joel, boy, you need it ten times more than I do.' So Joel took it and put it on.

"But right then the door opened and in came Miss Evelina. (She had been to Springfield to visit Mrs. Lincoln for a week.) She stood there all shining and lovely, and for a while those two just stood and looked at each other. Then Uncle Joel spoke.

"'I didn't know that you were here, Evelina. For that matter, it doesn't mean much, now that I do know. For I can't speak one word to you. Not yet.'

"Miss Evelina looked at him a long while. Then she said a queer thing.

"'Are you ever coming back, Joel?'

"'I'm coming back if I—if I ever dare to.'

"'Then,' said Miss Evelina, very cool and clear, 'in that case, I'll wait.'

"Uncle Joel didn't seem to understand for a minute. Then he sort of straightened up all over. He looked down at the overcoat. He turned perfectly scarlet. He took it off and laid it on Father's arm.

“ ‘Much obliged, Jack,’ he said, ‘but I reckon I won’t need it, after all.’

“He gave Father a handshake, and went down the lane. Halfway down, he turned and looked back. But he didn’t look back at Father, nor us children. He looked right at Miss Evelina, so slim and lovely and still.

“ ‘You won’t have to wait very long,’ he said. Then he went away over that glare ice with the old pieces of carpet tied over his shoes. But he went like lightning just the same.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

LATE one blowy cloudy spring day Mr. Lincoln rode up the lane. Only two nights ago he had stopped in for supper and a long contented visit. To-day he was ten years older. His dry wrinkled face had fallen into leathery furrows. His cavernous eyes were pits of dark.

He slumped down into a chair and turned his gray bewildered face to Father. Father, drawn and haggard, looked back at him.

“You’ve heard the news, Stafford?”

“This morning. At the postoffice. I’ve looked for this all along. Yet I didn’t really believe it. I can’t believe it now.”

“Probably it won’t go through, after all. This is merely their first gain. Plenty of time to defeat them.”

“Defeat them? How can we? They have repealed the Missouri Compromise. The covenant of our Constitution is broken within our hands.”

“It shall not be broken, Stafford. There are enough of us, the anti-slavery men, to force a reaction. Right here and now.”

“You can’t believe what you are saying. For if the nation’s faith in our Union is so strong, then how has this infamous action won its ends?”

Mr. Lincoln had been talking against himself, that was certain. Now he threw off that mask of senseless hope.

“God help this nation, Stafford. This is the beginning of universal freedom. Or else—it is the beginning of the end.”

“They sat there a long time and didn’t say one word,” wrote Mercy. “Exactly like two poor miserable little boys,

who had been whipped and scolded besides. Father wouldn't say anything. And for once in his life, I guess Mr. Lincoln couldn't find anything to say. At last he said, 'Well, Stafford, I know now how you have felt these years past. I never did understand before.' But Father didn't seem to hear him. Goodness knows, I wish they didn't make themselves so unhappy about something they can't help. But Aunty says that's menfolks for you. Every time."

For days after the certainty that the Missouri Compromise had been repealed, John Stafford went about, stunned, silent. All these years he had longed so terribly to help, to share. He had poured out his strength, he had given the best of his life. And he had failed. All his pleadings had fallen on deaf ears. Not one man had listened. Not one hand had stretched out to grasp the torch from his eager hand.

Emerson had been right, of course. "You won't even have the satisfaction of being a martyr. You'll be a dreary nuisance. . . ."

But a man must use what talents are vouchsafed him. He was as his life and the lives of his forebears had made him. Perhaps he would have accomplished more if he had waved and shouted and made a noisy personal appeal. But he could not. He hadn't known how. He had no traffic with the virulent, not with the cheaply sentimental. He could speak only truth, no matter how cold, how dull. His pen would have turned in his hand had he forced it to blacken the South or to deny the faults of the North. Well, he was a failure, that was all. He was a barren old fig-tree, cursed with the pulsing sap of eager hope, never to be blessed with fruit.

What was it he had told Emerson? "If I can only find one man——" What a fool, what a presumptuous fool

he had been to dream that he might find even one. Every great army must have its stragglers. He himself was just a straggler, a camp-follower, when he had fancied himself a leader, a counselor!

Well, there had been other fools before his time. There would be more fools to follow. "Who hath believed our report?" The ancient bitter cry rang in his ears. Why ask? There could be no reply. He had believed, he had followed his mighty hope, and it had disowned his worship. His faith itself had fallen to ashes before his eyes.

So he stumbled on through darkening hours. Then, strangely, there was granted to him a gleam of promise.

He had ridden to Springfield where he spent some days. The evening of his return Mr. Lincoln had suggested that he would ride home with Father and stay the night, as he did so often in order to make an early start to court the next morning.

Now back of the Stafford land lay a strip of woods which abutted on the highroad between Springfield and St. Louis. This highroad was constantly used by emigrant trains on their way west. It was a winding turnpike, which finally merged with the road which lay in front of the Stafford home. That merging point lay a full two miles below the place. But now a new cross-road had been cut which united the two at a point just below Father's land. This new road would cut off miles of driving for the west-bound travelers. It would bring the stream of emigrants within a few yards of the Stafford house itself.

On their way back the two men took this short cut. It had been open only a few days. Neither man had ridden on it until to-day.

They had hardly entered it until they had to rein in their horses to make way for an oncoming train.

At first glance this caravan was the prototype of the

thousands of caravans that so constantly crossed the state. But as the two sat waiting on their restive horses, a curious question came to them. How long could this string be? How long had they waited? Five minutes—ten minutes—half an hour—

“Isn’t there any end to this procession?” Mr. Lincoln bent forward, peering. As far as eye could see they were coming still. Huge white-topped wagons, patient teams, led horses, provision trains. Gigantic flat trucks drawn by eight yoke of oxen dragged the wheels and boilers for a mill. Another truck carried a forge with the blacksmith hard at work, welding a white-hot chain. And every wagon bore not only its own emblem, a maple branch, a coonskin, a horseshoe; but on every white canvas top was painted its insolent gay goal: “ON TO KANSAS!” “KANSAS AND FREEDOM!” “BEECHER BIBLES FOR BORDER BULLIES!”

“This isn’t just an emigrant train,” finally Mr. Lincoln spoke. “This is a crusade, Stafford, don’t you see? A pilgrimage. The pilgrimage of a nation.”

Mr. Stafford did not answer. He could not have answered had he tried. For one moment, the old swift exultation awoke in him. If only for this breath his shamed dream was his again.

“If I could only go myself!” But old, tired, all but penniless, the Promised Land was not for him. “Oh, if I could help even—”

Help! The pitiful absurdity of that! Not a dollar had he to spare, not an hour of time, not an ounce of strength that was not pledged over and over to earning for the actual needs of his own children!

“But there must be something I can do. If I had one single advantage that I could share with these people, one comfort, one lift that I could give them on their way!

But I have nothing. Nothing but barely enough food for my own. Actually, the only thing left to me that I dare to share is my well. Good drinking water. That's the only thing of which we have enough and to spare. . . .”

“The little boys have a new job,” wrote Mercy. “The first real honest-to-goodness job they have ever had, and they are proud enough to burst, all three of them. Now that the new road is cut and the Free-Kansas men are crossing through only a little way from our house, Father has told the boys that they can take turns providing fresh water for the travelers' casks, and watering their horses, too. Sometimes as many as three great long caravans come trailing through in one day. You wouldn't believe how surprised and grateful the travelers are. They are well equipped, most of them, with fine new Conestogas, and good beds and plenty of blankets and cooking things. But as one man told Father yesterday the finest Conestoga made can't carry a flowering well with water as cold as ice, and so fresh and pure. They drink and drink and drink. They're always so hot and thirsty their tongues fairly hang out. Afterward we let their horses and cattle drink too. Its lucky for us that our well is fed by a spring that never was known to fail.

“The little boys pretend they are on a ship at sea, so one of them must perch up atop of the gate-post so he can watch out over the prairie. Then when he sees a wagon-train coming he signals the others, and they pump the drinking casks full and ready. They work as hard as they ever did digging in the Indian mounds, and they wear their clothes out faster than ever, but Father doesn't seem to mind. I worried at first to have Thomas paddle in the water so much for fear it might bring on croup again, but he hasn't wheezed once. But we have to tie Trouble in

the barn for he thinks it is his bounden duty to thrash all the pioneers' dogs, and that keeps him too busy.

"I wrote Richard about how we are sharing our water with everybody that goes by, and he thinks it is a splendid idea. He says, times that he has been stuck up on a broiling wagon-seat, driving a load of refugees, he would have given a year of his life if he'd dared stop long enough for a swallow of cold well-water. Mr. Lincoln says he is proud of these pioneers, and thinks we should feel honored by the chance to give them this lift. He gave an oration about them at the Lord's Barn last Sunday. He said these folks are like the Pilgrim fathers only finer if anything, because the Pilgrims left their own land to escape persecution and to win freedom for themselves. But that these Free-Kansas men did not have to run away from persecution. Instead, they had turned their backs on their own comfort and ease and set out for a rough new country to save it for freedom. He said we should always call them pioneers, not emigrants. 'For the emigrant goes out into strange lands to better himself,' says Mr. Lincoln, 'and that is all very well. But the pioneer leaves safe comfortable lands, and starts out to better the country to which he goes. Maybe he will improve his own condition by so doing, maybe not. Moreover, the emigrant will build up a civilization by slow degrees. But the pioneer, at least such pioneers as these, will take with him his civilization, the finest civilization that this continent has ever known.'

"'Plenty of people think that these Kansas pioneers are starting out armed with Beecher Bible * and a skillet, and precious little else. But I tell you that these covered wagons that pass us today are chests of treasure. Look in them and

* The Beecher Bibles were the Springfield rifles sent out with the Free-Kansas expeditions which were equipped by Henry Ward Beecher and his congregation.

you will find the things tangible: old royal land grants, rosewood cradles, books and manuscripts, fine old silver. Listen to their talk, and you will find the things intangible: stately memories, proud traditions. For these tired dusty men who pass us to-day are the wheat, the cream, the marrow of their nation. They are fiber and sinew, flesh and spirit, the kernel of America's finest grain. And this, their journey, is not just a dull migration. This is the onslaught of an almighty hope. These men sow in splendor. They shall reap in freedom.'

"—I felt that it was a very genteel discourse, but lots of our folks were quite sniffy about it. They say that Mr. Lincoln might just as well come right out and say he's an Abolitionist and be done with it. And Mr. Timothy Lyman says he'd wager they's plenty of your fine pioneers who have lit out from their home country, a-purpose to get out from under their home-town constable's thumb.

"Richard writes that he is coming some time this spring to stay two days. We can't get married this time, for he has to earn quite a bit more before he can pay enough on his land to hold it. But I don't care. I just want to see him so dreadfully that I won't complain if he can stay only one day. Or one hour. Or one minute."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

RICHARD had come, for a day and a night. Richard here, for the first time since last October, and here it was June! It had been so long. Too long. Yet here he stood, so tall, so glorious, so brimming-full of love and teasing and rascally small-boy delight! She had planned his coming, so many times over, she had pictured out every perfect moment. But here, sitting beside him on Mount Everest, she could not speak. She did not want to move. She wanted only to sit there motionless in the great gold sweep of sun and wind and prairie, and listen to his rushing eager voice, and be quiet. Quiet in a happiness that was life and breath and healing. Not a thought of dread or worry left to her. Not even a shadow of fear.

"Turn around, Mrs. Lot, so I can rest my eyes on you. Actually, you haven't aged so very much. Not nearly as much as I'd expected." He took up her slender little hand, scrutinized it, then kissed the little broom-and-churn callouses on the rosy palm.

"Ridiculous-looking hands you've got. Don't know whether I really ought to marry you. For I want a wife who will be some good for pioneering. The kind that can pull stumps and shoe the mules and knock the Indians off the front stoop. These don't look worth shucks. They look like they were made out of May-apple blooms. Or else spring beauties. Although if a man wants something to look at, they'll do well enough."

Mercy utilized one of them to cuff his ears. Then she took his own paw, bent the fingers back, and set to tapping his broad palm with her fingertips.

"What's all that performance?"

"It's a sort of code Father taught me." Mercy gazed up at him, sedate and grave. "Suppose you're in church or some place where you mustn't talk out loud. Well, you can spell out what you want to say, or even tap it without speaking a word. Here, I'll make three taps. Can you guess what that means?"

"Yes," said Richard, promptly. "But I know a lot better way to say it. I'll show you."

He did.

"I'm going to get that same team from old Currier and we'll go for a drive, Mercy."

"Oh-h, Rich! But ought we to spend?"

"Hush, I guess I can afford to take my girl riding just once in six months. Besides, Mr. Lincoln wants me to do an errand for him. He asked me to take some legal papers over to Colonel Andrews down beyond Coles Creek."

"Right across Cooper Township?"

"Yes."

"That will be fine, for I need some early apples for pies, and we can stop at Mrs. Isaiah's for them. That's near Coles Creek. You see Father is taking Aunty and Miss Evelina and the two older boys to Springfield. Mr. Phillips is to lecture there to-day. He'd take Thomas, too, only Thomas was croupy last night and I'm afraid to let him go. But we can take him on our ride, for we'll be home before dark."

"Take Thomas along! Great Scott!"

A spark of Father's own devilment awoke in Mercy's eyes.

"Why, Richard, he's been so good all week he deserves it. If I wanted to take all three little boys, you might have some excuse to fuss."

Thereupon Richard indulged in what would be called, if

he were Thomas's age, a tantrum. Mercy adored it, while she derided it.

"Anybody would think Thomas was a raging hyena instead of a good obedient little boy who never bothered anybody in all his life. I'll tell you what we can do. We will drive over to Mrs. Isaiah's, leave Thomas there, then come back for him later. No, I cannot leave him here, soul alone. Even Twonnet is staying at old Miss Tuckerman's this week."

"Oh, well. If we've got to——"

Then he looked at Mercy. Looked at her as if he would grave her face upon his sight, as if he never asked to see anything again except those silver-gilt braids, that long clear serious glance, that square small chin, those lips that were his own. Her thoughts were his thoughts, she had no wish that was not woven into his, dyed with the color of his will. She would have followed him barefoot through the world.

"*You!*" he said, under his breath.

They stopped at Mrs. Isaiah's and deposited Thomas, exuding a veritable odor of sanctity, under her neighborly wing. Then the two drove on. Halfway across Cooper Township came Coles Creek, now swollen by heavy rains to a young flood. The Andrews' farm was only a few hundred yards from the farther shore. But between them stretched a tumble of muddy water.

"Will you look at that! We never can cross with the team. We'll bog down, sure as fate."

"Yes, and these papers are urgent. I promised Mr. Lincoln that the Colonel should have them to-day sure as shootin'."

"You take one horse, and make him swim across. I'll stay here till you get back."

"Yes, I'd feel fine leaving you here alone!"

"Don't be a goose, Rich. I'll be perfectly safe."

"But look at those clouds. Rolling up for another rain."

"Oh, it won't rain for an hour or more. If it does, I'll run for the haunted cabin."

"The what?"

"The cabin where the haunted mirror hangs. Didn't I ever tell you about it? Right over yonder." She pointed out the sagging gables, the crumbling chimney, clearly seen past the abandoned orchard. "We've passed it a dozen times, but Father is so notional, he never lets me step inside."

"Your father is a mighty sensible man. Just let me catch you sticking your nose inside a place like that."

This was a shade too proprietary.

"Oh, hurry along, Rich. Can't you see how fast that rain is coming?"

A bank of purple darkened the horizon. The air was growing hazed and dim.

"Well, I'm off. Stay here, then. I won't be out of calling distance. At least, not more than ten minutes."

Two minutes more and he and his horse were pounding up the farther bank. He waved and shouted back, then disappeared behind the trees.

Mercy had miscalculated. It was not five minutes until those purple banks stretched from horizon to zenith. There came a crash of thunder followed by swift heavy drops.

"No matter how bossy Rich likes to be, he wouldn't want me to stick around here through a storm. I'm going to the cabin. After all these years I couldn't possibly catch the fever. And I do so want a peep at that mirror!"

To enter the cabin was to enter a cave of dust and gloom. Spiderwebs curtained the narrow window. Small

squeaks and rustles startled her as she slipped across the room. Broken chairs, a torn rag rug, a splintery board table, but tall, golden, royal, towering in that grimy murk, shone the great gold mirror.

Awe and pity shook Mercy's heart. She stared into those vague depths that had gathered to themselves so much of loveliness, so much of reckless joy, such terror. Mr. Lincoln's words came echoing back: "The flowing sparkling ladies, the swaggering dandies, the blustering old captain—where had all their sparkle and swagger and bluster gone now?"

Where would it all go, anyway? She too stood here, but only for this moment: her soft cheek, her strong little hands, her blue delaine dress with its white starched ruffles. So would Rich shine here, for one instant . . . Rich's dear insolent handsome face, the scar across his forehead, the funny little dent that cocked one black eyebrow. All Rich's splendor would flare one instant, across that glimmering expanse, then vanish as she too would vanish. Never to shine in this gray gloom again.

Thunder volleyed. The room grew darker still. The rickety door blew open. Mercy ran to prop it shut.

"Rich will be drenched. And he won't be able to coax that skittish horse across the creek till this downpour stops."

She must have spoken aloud. From across the room came a quiet chuckling voice:

"That will give us time for a fine long visit. Eh, Beauty?"

With a grasp, she whirled and faced the voice.

Frederick Owen. Frederick Owen, in his long dove-colored riding coat, and his violet waistcoat, and the clear white diamonds glittering on his neckcloth. Frederick Owen. He was coming towards her, laughing softly with each slow reeling step. He bent his head, looked straight

down into her eyes. That look tore through her like a huge unclean hand.

All the breath went out of her body. She leaped for the door.

Drunk though he was, Frederick was quicker. Quick as a hawk. He was down on her with one swoop, he had pinioned her hands and thrown her against the wall, he was slamming her back and forth against the door casing, beating her head against it with every shake. She tried to scream, but the pain was too fearful. She fought and twisted and kicked, but he had jammed his knee against her knee, flattened her body taut against the wall. She ducked her head, set her teeth into his hand. He yelled with fury and struck her in the face with his free hand. Holding her clenched against the wall, he stooped and pulled the little dirk from his boot.

"Listen, Beauty. You wouldn't let me carve our names on th' office wall, remember? Well, all ri'. *All ri'*. But I ain' discouraged yet. Not *me*. I'm goin' carve those nishels right here, where you won' forget. Right on your sweet little neck, so's you can't never forget——"

The dirk slashed through her blue delaine shoulder, sheared away the starched frills. A stab of pain followed the dirk, a quick gush of blood.

Something crashed behind them. Frederick gave a queer smothered squeal. The dirk clattered on the floor. He let go Mercy's hands, turned to face that crash.

He did not have a chance. As the door toppled inward, Richard had sprung on him. He gripped him as a terrier grips a rat. You could not see in that dark room. You could not hear, you could not feel, even, for your hands were too numb, your whole body was struck motionless. Yet you knew the thud of iron flesh on flesh, the gasping breaths. Then a silence that screamed in your ears.

Richard shoved the door open, propped it with a broken chair. In the dim light you saw Richard's torn shirt, his bleeding face, the bleeding huddle that lay face down on the stone of the hearth.

"Settled him." Richard pushed the heap aside with his foot. "Now, you——"

He tried to go on. He couldn't. He lurched across the room and gathered up Mercy somehow, then stumbled over to a bench and sat down with her. He sat there a good while clutching her to him weakly. Finally he began to mumble incoherent words, to sob over her, to croon over her.

"Richard, darling! Don't, don't. I'm not hurt. Only this one cut. And he's spoiled my collar, but the dress will wash, all right. Richard, don't! Stop now!"

He couldn't stop. He cried the way Donny used to cry when he was very little. Thank goodness, Donny didn't cry like that any more. On and on, hopelessly, despairingly, as if he was locked away somewhere, forgotten, as if he knew he'd never be found again.

Presently Mercy roused herself. She shook herself free from Richard's arms. She pulled him to his feet. She dragged him outside, and splashed water on him from the hogshead below the eaves. She kissed him and scolded him and comforted him.

"Anybody would think you were five years old, going on six. Stop gulping, or I'll smack you. Keep sopping your face with your wet handkerchief and maybe that will stop the bleeding. And for goodness' sake, find me a pin. You must have one stuck in your coat somewhere. You don't want me to ride home with my sleeve cut clear off my shoulder like this. There, there, I didn't mean to start you all over again. Richard, stop it!"

At last Richard stopped. He couldn't stop trembling,

though. He shook like a leaf when Mercy, scolding, urging, drove him back into the room, and made him pick Frederick up and bring him outdoors.

“Reckon I’ve killed him. Hope so, anyway.”

“That’s a fine way to talk. Anybody would think you were a bushwhacker. Pick him up, now. Goodness, how floppy he is. But maybe he’ll brace up when we get him into the air.”

It took some time to rouse Frederick. When he did rouse, he could stand, but could not walk. He moaned and wailed when they tried to make him step, he sniffled like a sick puppy.

Richard felt him over, none too gently.

“Can’t find anything broken, except his jaw. Whew, I gave him some ugly bruises. Look at his face.”

Mercy did not want to look at his face. It made her feel too peculiar inside. It was not much of a face any more. It was black, where it wasn’t purple, and it was pulpy all over. His swollen and broken jaw made his whole head look knocked sidewise, like a lump of bluish dough.

“Take your handkerchief, Rich, and tie up that poor jaw. It must hurt dreadfully. Yes, I know it’s one I made for you. What of it? I’ll make you another. Yes, I’ll steady his head. But hurry.”

They bandaged the lolling head as best they could.

“Now hold his horse, Mercy, while I hoist him on.”

Easier said than done. The horse, young and fractious, sidled and bucked. Frederick was too logy to help himself. But at last they got him into the saddle. As Richard put the reins into his hands he took a fairly firm hold. Whining with the pain of every movement, he yet drew himself erect, and struck out clumsily with the whip that

Mercy had given him. The horse galloped away down the road towards his home.

"He'll get home, all right. Wish I had finished him, though. Damn him!"

"Richard Harrison, I am surprised at you. Harness quick, now, and let's go for Thomas. Mrs. Isaiah will think we've dumped him on her hands for all night."

They drove away toward Mrs. Isaiah's. It was fortunate that they had no more creeks to cross, for this rain had been more than a rain. It had been a cloudburst.

"Father and the folks will have to stay in Springfield to-night."

"They'll be lucky if they don't have to stay to-morrow night. This rain is a young flood. Hi, there's Thomas. Will you look at him! You'll have to run him through the wringer."

This was too accurately put. All traces of Thomas's recent sanctity were washed away. Mrs. Isaiah was an easy-going guardian. Thomas and the young Brookers had spent a delightful afternoon, playing Duck on a Rock, and a trifle like a cloudburst had not interrupted their fun. Thomas was soaking from head to foot, he was stuffed with green apples, he wheezed like a cheerful little grampus. Mercy saw a prolonged session with camphor, and goosegrease.

Her foresight was too well vindicated. By suppertime, Thomas's cheery air had given way to heavy choking drowsiness. When Richard came in from the milking, he found Mercy before the fire rocking the poor little sinner in her arms, while a loathly mess of onion-and-molasses simmered on the hob. By eight o'clock Richard was begging to go for a doctor.

"You can't reach town to-night. Not in this storm.

Anyway, Richard, I'd like you to stay with us till the folks get home."

"Think you could drive me away? I stay here to-night and to-morrow, too, if you need me. Whoa, Thomas! Here, let me carry him to the window. Maybe he can breathe there."

Thomas was getting very tired of breathing. He had made a gallant fight, but his chuffy little neck was swollen hard, his voice came slowly in agonized toiling gasps. Mercy fought with him, shoulder to shoulder. All her skill, all the life in her, fought too. She forgot Richard, she forgot Frederick Owen. She knew nothing but that precious little body in her arms, the small hot clutching hands, the tortured wrenching breaths. At ten o'clock, she and Richard looked at each other in terror. At midnight, there was a respite. Thomas breathed easier. From one o'clock till four, they fought death hand to hand.

At daybreak, the agony yielded. Thomas did not lift his head. He did not even open his eyes. But every taut straining muscle let go. He pitched backward, limp, ashen, into Mercy's lap.

Mercy looked down incredulously at the lax little armful, the dark congested little face, slowly clearing to a dim drowned likeness of itself. Then she gathered the child up, and went staggering into Aunty's room. She pitched down on the great pineapple bed. She knew nothing, asked nothing, but the chance to lie where she had fallen, the little boy still clasped to her breast. But even as she sank into exhausted sleep, her arms did not loosen. And in the depths of his own sleep, Thomas clung feebly round her neck, as if he knew that only in his sister's clasp lay safety.

Richard looked down at them. He laid a blanket over

them and tucked it in. Then he looked at the clock. Twenty minutes of five.

He closed the door softly and crouched on the kitchen step. He did not turn his eyes from the silent room.

—It was high noon when Mercy awoke. Thomas still slept. Richard was clumping around the kitchen trying to cook breakfast. Mercy swallowed a cup of his unspeakable scorched coffee and ate a slice of bread. Thomas lay in a lax ashen little heap, but he was out of danger. That she knew. She and Richard looked the worse for wear but that was all. Yet upon both of them lay a queer lethargy, a heavy burden of dread.

“What ails us?” thought Mercy. “By six o’clock, Rich must start back to Springfield. We have only these few hours together. And here we must sit as dumb as two graven images. I’m ashamed of us!”

At five o’clock that afternoon Father and his solidly packed household drove up the lane. Worn out by the long drive home through the flooded fields, they wasted scarce a word of greeting upon Richard. Mercy forebore to trouble them at once with an account of Thomas’s illness, but instead set about making her family comfortable.

She brought out dry clothing and started a kettle of soup.

While she was setting the table two men rode up the lane. Sheriff Correll and Lind Wheeler, his deputy, both armed. They entered, hardly pausing to knock. Father rose up and greeted them cordially.

“Sit down, gentlemen. Supper will be ready in a minute. We are glad to have you with us.”

The sheriff looked at him queerly.

“Sorry, Mr. Stafford, but I reckon you know why we’re here. We want your young friend.”

“What young friend?”

“Richard Harrison. He can tell you why we want him,

all right. Folks found young Owen lying dead in Coles Creek in shallow water close by the Andrews' place. Drowned? Yes, and worse than drowned. He'd been beat and pounded to death first, then slung into the creek. He was all one black bruise from head to foot. Colonel Andrews told us that young Harrison had stopped there yesterday, with some papers from Lawyer Lincoln. And Owen's jaw was tied up with a handkerchief. A handkerchief with 'R.H.' sewed on it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

AFTERWARDS, Mercy need not try to remember. She could see it all, very small and sharp and clear, as if drawn with the finest of pens on the thinnest parchment. So fine, so clear, she could see the coarse stained skin of the sheriff's hand as he dropped it on Rich's shoulder. She could see the blank amazement on Rich's face change to question, then to slow kindling anger. She could see herself flash across the room and tear the sheriff's hand away. She could hear her own senseless scream of fury. "Rich didn't—he didn't! When Rich put him on his horse he was able to ride away. Rich didn't go back and drown him. He *couldn't!* He stayed right with me——"

Then Rich had turned and struck his hand down over her mouth, struck down so hard it bruised her lips till they bled. His swift angry whisper rang in her ears. "Mercy Rose! Be quiet. Don't you dare say one word. Not one word—to anybody!" Then Father had caught her back, hushing her sternly. And before she could tear herself from him, before she could snatch Rich away from them, they had snatched him away from her. And Father's voice was echoing too.

"Mercy, be quiet. Richard is innocent. He could not have done this thing. Be quiet!"

"Go get Rich for me then! Go bring him back to me!"

"I'll have to wait. We must both wait. You shall have Rich again. But to-night we must give way to the law. To-morrow I'll get Mr. Lincoln——"

"To-morrow—to-morrow! Get him to-night. I won't wait. *I won't!*"

"My child, look at that flooded road. It took me seven hours to bring us home from Springfield to-day. It would take even longer if I tried to go back to Springfield by night. I'll start at daybreak. Even if I could reach Mr. Lincoln to-night, he could do nothing till morning. We'll have to go into court, we'll have to try for bail——"

"I want Rich to-night. I will have him to-night. Father, you must bring him. You *must!*"

He could not soothe her. He could not silence her. He knelt beside her, holding her tight, he poured out his anguished tenderness, his tortured futile pity. At last through her agony there came a gleam of light.

Richard was innocent. Anybody could see that, who had the sense to see at all. All she need do was to hold her silence as Rich had commanded her—to say nothing of Owen's attack upon her, nothing of that day and night. It would be hard. Mercy's stern little chin quivered at the thought. But it was the only way that she could deal honestly by Rich.

Aunty was right. Menfolks were a terrible responsibility. But Rich was innocent. Everybody could see that. And by suppertime to-morrow night, Mr. Lincoln would have come and straightened out everything. Just as he always did. And Rich would be here, just as always. He would be laughing at her for being such a silly calf about him. He'd be telling Aunty that the eye of man had never alighted on such squirrel pie, and he'd be challenging Thomas to a pancake contest, and stuffing down fat little sausages meanwhile with the speed of light. . . .

Then deathly terror caught her, swept her from head to foot.

She stood up. Her knees shook under her, a black mist rolled before her eyes. But she lifted her head high, and she set her little chin like iron. Father's own chin.

"I'm sorry, Father. I'm going to behave now. Tomorrow things won't be so dreadful."

Father wasn't grown up, really. He was nothing but a little boy. Not one minute older than Adoniram. For she hadn't got the words out of her mouth till that gray terror was fading from his face. He pulled himself together, precisely as Donny pulled himself together when you'd tided him through a lonesome spell. All the light came back into his face, all the cheerfulness to his voice. . . . N-no. Perhaps not quite all.

"There's my good girl!" Father's arms caught her tight.

But back of that cheerful patient voice she could feel the heavy beat of his heart. Father's dear patient heart, weighed down, leaden with fear for her. "We'll get Mr. Lincoln by daylight. He'll straighten everything out. No doubt about it. Now sleep, dear."

Sleep! Could she ever sleep again?

But sleep she did. On her narrow bed, Thomas held tight for comfort, she lay in a sleep like death for hours on hours. When she awoke at last, she scrambled out of bed, realizing only that she had slept outrageously late, and stood struggling drowsily to brush the sleep from her heavy eyes. It was not till she stooped to kiss little Thomas awake that that black remembering swept down on her.

For a minute she stood gripping the limp little Thomas. Her face turned white as chalk, her hands grew ice. The room whirled and darkened around her. She stood there very straight and small in her skimpy little nightgown. She fingered the lace sleeve ruffles, with numb bewildered hands. Yes, it was that identical old lacy gown. Father had torn the hem from it that night, to make Rich's bandage. Aunty had mended it for her, and she had scolded, too, because the whole lower edge, with two yards of inch-

wide shell-crochet lace, was gone beyond recall. Mercy chuckled faintly. Oh, well, who cared? Even if shell crochet was poky to make, it had done good service. It had tied up that ugly cut for Rich. For Rich. But now Rich was gone and this time she couldn't reach him. She couldn't help him. All she could do for him was to keep still. Rich had told her to keep still. Well, all right. But it surely would be hard. . . . Again that black mist thickened before Mercy's eyes. The rough boards slid away beneath her feet. Yes, it would be hard. But Rich had commanded her. At least she could do this one thing that he asked her. Menfolks had to have their way about things. And anyway, there was no use in worrying Father.

Before sunrise, Father had started on horseback to Springfield. He came back hours after. He looked very queer, and ashen white. When he swung off Button he stumbled and nearly fell. Mr. Lincoln had gone to Rock Island. Something to do with a Government case. Mrs. Lincoln had said he might be back in three days. But no telling.

Mercy did not say much. If she had to keep still, she'd keep still. It wasn't as hard as you'd think. Not when she was doing it for Rich. For Rich.

The day dragged endlessly. The little boys hung around their sister, awed and quiet. They did not understand. But something had hurt their sister. She did not romp with them, not once that whole long day. She did not talk about their school. She did not talk about anything. She wasn't Mercy, that was all. When they came home from school, she didn't run to meet them. To be sure, she did draw a bucket of water from the well and fill the basin, so that they could wash their grimy hands. She spread a royal plateful of bread and 'lasses, and tied up Thomas's

stubbed toe, and soused sweet-oil on Seth's cowlick, just as she always did. But she wasn't Mercy. She wasn't there. She was looking for something she had lost, searching for somebody else. Richard. Richard. Richard.

Once or twice, that dark mist thickened before her till she found herself clutching out, snatching to grasp him, till she could feel her throat so dry and taut in the effort to shriek his name. But she choked back that scream, she forced her gripping hands to go back to whatever task lay near. There was quite enough to keep her hands busy. Thomas's last trousers were worn through at the knees, and Donny hadn't a decent pair of stockings to his name, and Seth had played lion-tamer last Sunday and tried to tease Cartouche into a rough-and-tumble fight. Cartouche, for all he was so lazy and so drowsy, had given Seth one large impatient slap with a huge paw which raked his Sabbath raiment fore and aft. How in the nation could anybody mend cat scratches that had ripped good heavy broadcloth into fringe, Aunty had declared indignantly. But Mercy had taken hold and was weaving the raveled fibers back inch by inch. Although as Mr. Lincoln would say, it was proving a land-office job.—After a while Mr. Lincoln would come. And he would straighten out all this hideous tangle. He would clear Richard. He would make everything right. Richard. Richard. Every thought led back to Richard. Because Richard was all the world. And you couldn't go on living without him much longer.

And soon, queerly soon, came the night. And sleep that folded her like the cloak of death, itself.

Then came the brazen flaming of another day. And on this day Father did not leave the house. He hung around near Mercy, his eyes hardly left her face. Through that black mist, Mercy was very sorry for Father. She knew that he was suffering for her. She knew that he was doing

everything in his power for Rich. She knew that the reason he didn't speak to her was because he was in too much misery to speak. Well, she didn't dare speak, either. Rich had told her not to say anything. She must hold fast to Rich's command. Menfolks were queer, anyway. But Rich had ordered silence. It was hers to obey.

The second day dragged on and on. It was a cruel day. It would never make an end. Blundering, blinded under that thickening mist, Mercy stumbled on and on.

On the third day, she rose up with a flare of desperate courage. Three days. To-day Mr. Lincoln would come. Mr. Lincoln would make everything right. But nothing seemed to change at all.

It was just another day. Just another day of agony, of fear.

Over and over she fought that creeping dread.

"When Mr. Lincoln comes—" she said to herself, a quivering promise. "When Mr. Lincoln comes—"

But she said not one word to Father. What good did it do? And anyway, she'd only worry Father.

After a while she knew that the foundations of her world were giving way beneath her feet. For till now Father had always done everything. Father had always understood. Now Father could only stumble up and down the lane, hour on hour. Or else sit with his hands locked together and stare into her face, as if the sheer power of his great anguished love could lift this shadow from his darling. Mercy knew what he was suffering. To know that this was hurting Father so terribly was just one more stab. But she couldn't say a word without hurting Father still more. And anyway Richard had told her to keep silence. Richard. Richard. . . .

At four o'clock Donny and Seth and Thomas came banging into the house.

Donny and Seth entered in a humor far from brotherly. Donny was as one beset by the cantankerousness of this present world. The school children had long since discerned his sensitive side, and ingenious young fiends that they were, they had profited largely by their discovery. On hot moisty days like this one, Donny's freckles, always too visible, grew actually luminous. To-day he had faced hours of torment. "Ginny-egg, Ginny-egg!" The hateful cry had hailed him at every turn. Donny was adding day by day to his slim little store of pluck, but a whole day of bullying was too much. Only one place in the world, he knew, meant comfort. He headed straight for Mercy's lap.

Seth, too, had his woes. Chief among them was his despised cowlick. For the sake of that cowlick he had endured jibes without number. To-day his enemies had been all but inspired in epithet.

Now deep in Seth's heart, a tiny flame of envy had always smoldered towards Donny. Donny, who need only turn pale and sniffle a time or so, to gain his sister's eager anxious pity. To-day when he observed his brother hasten to the coveted refuge that tiny fire flamed high.

Seth and Donny arrived on Mercy's lap at precisely the same moment. Two heads bumped together with a reverberating crack. Seth, plump and a bit clumsy, spilled off Mercy's knee and landed sprawling on the floor. But Donny, agile little rascal, had seen Seth coming. His strong little arms shot around Mercy's neck in a choking grip. A cruel grip. Mercy gasped out as those powerful little fingers closed on the unhealed cut.

"Oh-h-h! Don't, Donny! Oh, please!"

She stopped with a gulp. No. You mustn't worry Father. That was her instant thought. But Father had seen too much. He had sprung to his feet, he had caught Donny

from her arms and set him down on the floor with a bump that jarred the rafters.

"What do you mean, sir? Can't you see you've hurt your sister?"

"Oh, but he didn't!" Mercy had dropped back, dizzy and sick. For the pain was dreadful. So dreadful that it loosed the words upon her tongue. "Donny didn't know—he wouldn't have hurt me for the world——"

But Father had let go of Donny. He stood there looking down at Mercy Rose. Mercy had never seen him look like that. His face was gray and drawn and old. His eyes were blazing. Mercy floundered on.

"Donny couldn't have hurt me, Father. If it hadn't been for that cut——"

"What cut?"

Mercy felt shaken and queer. Never in all her life had Father spoken to her like this. His voice was quiet. Deadly quiet. His eyes on her were dark flames.

"Why, the poor little fellow . . . he just brushed the place where Frederick Owen——"

Father's voice was gentle as always. Gentle, even now. But the quiet syllables seared.

Father waited. He put out his hand to Mercy, then drew it back again. Mercy stared at it vaguely. If he had touched her, she would have known how cruelly he was trembling, how cold he was. Cold with terror of what her next words might be. But he did not touch her. He just stood there in his dusty work clothes, leaning to her. His beautiful gray head bent close.

"Tell me."

Oh, you couldn't say No to him. And yet——

"Tell me, dear."

Again that gentleness, that merciless gentleness, that all but broke her down.

"I—I mustn't. Richard told me not to say one word——"

"*Richard!*" Father was shaken with a fury that all but stopped his breath. Always, always Richard. "How did he dare."

"Oh, Father, you're all wrong! Richard didn't do one thing to me. But when Frederick Owen slashed into my shoulder——"

"Mercy Rose! *Will you tell me——*"

But now Father's voice was terrible. His face was whiter than the gray-white wall behind him. Mercy began to choke. She was suffocated with bewilderment and fear.

"Oh, Father, I haven't told you one word. I was so afraid I would hurt Rich. Anyway, it's nothing so terrible. It's n-nothing——"

Then Mercy's iron clutch on herself gave way disgracefully. She began to cry. All the tears that she had held back these endless days broke past her wall of self-command, swept her, drowned her.

But she had been all wrong about Father. Father's voice was still so hard and cold and tremulous, but it wasn't harsh. Not one bit. Because when you'd gotten hold of the last shred of Father's voice, there wasn't any harshness left in it. It was all tenderness.

"Mercy Rose," he spoke again, "tell me. Tell Father."

When Father spoke like that, you had to answer him. But it was tearing her in little pieces.

She swallowed back her tears and set her grim little chin. The chin that was so precisely like Father's own.

"I'm awfully ashamed, Father. To be such a baby about this. But you see, it hasn't healed right. And if you touch it, you—well you can't really stand it. And when Donny landed so hard——"

Father had reached the end of his rope of endurance.

With one movement, light as the breeze, gentle as a falling leaf, he had lifted the bandage from her throat.

He did not say anything. Only he drew one quick hard breath at sight of the pitiful angry scars. Then he put back the bandage, and found fresh linen to fold over it. After a while, he spoke.

“I wouldn’t tell Aunty, dear.”

“No, sir.”

“But I would tell Mr. Lincoln.”

“Why, Father——”

“I mean it, daughter. Yes, I know Richard did not want you to say—anything. But tell Mr. Lincoln. Maybe he’ll reach home by morning.”

His voice stopped. Up the lane, his horse’s hoofs splashing in every puddle, came Mr. Brooker. He called a friendly hail.

“How are you, neighbor? I stopped by to bring your mail. I saw Mr. Lincoln getting off the stage, maybe an hour ago. He looked some flaxed out. Reckon Government cases ain’t so easy sledding as they look. Reckon he’s glad to get home again.”

Father nodded briefly. He reached for his bundle of mail. But Mercy gave one quick exultant gasp. Mr. Lincoln was in Springfield this minute!

“We’ll ride in to see Mr. Lincoln the first thing tomorrow morning, daughter.” Father had read her thought. She laid her cheek to his, submissively. But back of that submission, her wild heart was throbbing out its will. To-night! To-night! To-night!

It did not take long for the house to grow quiet, that evening. But to Mercy, waiting at her attic window, it took hours. She did not think to put on a dark dress. It never entered her mind to change her light shoes. When at last

she crept out, slid to the slanting shed roof and dropped to the ground below, her thin slippers were soaked in the first three steps. Her pink dress and white apron made a pale blur against the night.

She would have to take Button. This was chancy enough, for he was forever going lame. But Betsy would be sure to snort and whinny as she led her from the barn. And Father was only too easily awakened.

Button was exasperating. He did not approve of this performance, and he stamped and sidled till she quaked with fear. If Father should waken! But at last they reached the highroad. Once under way Button went like clockwork, in spite of the slippery mire.

After a while the rain stopped. Out of the cloud-drifts wandered a pallid bedraggled old moon, trailing shreds of mist. One small star tagged after her, clinging to her tattered apron-strings. Mercy looked up at her. Just such a dreary forlorn old moon had wandered down the sky that night a year and a half ago. The night that she and Father had sat together in the midnight woods. The night when down upon them like a spent arrow had fallen the beautiful wounded boy. Her boy. How young she had been in those days, what a funny silly little calf, to dream of a princely lover who would come racing down the forest road to rescue her! Rescue her, indeed! When all she asked, when all she could ever ask in this created world, was the chance to rescue him, to snatch him back from the dark brink where he stood to-night! Aunty's sardonic old voice rang in her ears. "Menfolks are an awful responsibility——" Oh, and weren't they worth it! Weren't they!

Button splashed on. It was a little easier going, now. To be sure, the mud was fetlock deep, but the faint moonlight was a help.

Before her loomed a sign-post. She urged Button as far

as she dared from the road, so that she could peer up at it. Johnston Crossroads. Good enough. If they could keep up as steady a pace as this, she could reach Springfield not long after midnight.

Button floundered miserably. This patch of road was far worse than the miles that had preceded it. He stumbled and lost his balance with a racking jerk. Mercy pulled him up sharply. Too sharply. He slipped and plunged to his knees. He scrambled to his feet at once. But now he lunged and staggered at every step.

"He's wrenched that shoulder again. I don't dare make him go another minute. But—— Oh, I never can make it afoot! Button, try, try!"

No use coaxing. Button was done. He stood still, snorting, quivering. Mercy sprang down and turned him into a field near by.

This was grim ill-luck. But maybe she could walk the rest of the way, after all. Five miles, six miles, in mud to her knees. Yes, she could make it.

Only—— What about Coles Creek?

She'd forgotten Coles Creek. Even yesterday it had been far out of its banks. By to-night it would be a flood. Even a strong swimmer would have found that rough cold current a heavy strain. Mercy could not swim a stroke.

"I can swim it, if I've got to," she said to herself. But at thought of that black water, that shelving treacherous bank, she grew queerly limp and sick. "I—I've got to swim it. If I can get to Mr. Lincoln by morning—if I can tell him all that happened—— Oh, well, I can make it. I can make it for Rich. For Rich . . ."

She pushed steadily on.

After a while she realized that she was getting very tired. She had plodded through the mire, halfway to her knees, at a steady unrelenting pace. But now her gait was

slackening, and she hadn't even reached Coles Creek. It was still more than a mile away.

"I ought to step up faster," she thought. For fifty yards or so she did step up faster. But it seemed as if the mud grew deeper with every step. This wouldn't do at all. She would have to hurry.

She tried to hurry. But with the first longer step a wrench of pain caught at her leg muscles, twisted them, wrung them. She went pitching against the worm fence with a wail of misery.

"I can't, I can't. Yes, you can, too. Get along with you, you 'fraid-cat, for this is for Rich. This is for Rich."

Every step meant a wrench of torture. She plunged on. After a while, she heard a faint distant sound. The far-away irregular thump of a horse's hoofs. It was so far behind her that it must be miles away. Farther behind than the field where she had abandoned Button, she thought.

"Somebody in a hurry," she thought dully. "Well, I ought to be in a hurry myself. Get along, you coward. Can't you remember that you've got to get there in time? You've got to reach the house by midnight. Earlier, maybe. Can't you realize that this is your best chance? You want to get hold of Mr. Lincoln before everybody else finds out that he has come home. For they'll all want him, on their own court cases. And I've got to have him for Rich. For Rich. . . ."

She struggled on. The moonlight was some company for her, but only for a while. Soon the waning crescent had slipped to the rim of the horizon. The faint star shine which would be now her only light was dimmed by fog. The road grew heavier; it was harder and harder to keep her footing on those hummocks of mire.

At last she glimpsed Coles Creek. Under the vague star-

light, the swift black water was veiled so heavily in fog that she could not discern the farther shore.

She stopped, breathless, on the steep bank.

"If it wasn't quite so slippery! If the water wasn't quite so high——"

But the bank was high and steep, and the current below was one dark rush and swirl. Mercy tried dizzily to descend that treacherous crumbling shore. Almost at the water level, she slipped, blundered. The racing water swept across her ankles, and rose like a flood of ice to her knees.

Terror-stricken, she scrambled back to higher ground.

"If it wasn't so dark," she gasped, through chattering teeth. "There's a ford near by, I know that. If only I could wade across—— I've got to cross, I tell you. I've got to get to Mr. Lincoln for Rich—for Rich——"

The horseman behind was approaching. His horse was fresh and swift, that was clear. The animal's hurrying bucketing gait told that. There was something queerly familiar about that gait.

"I've heard that horse's pace before. I wish I knew—— O-Oh, it's Betsy! And Father is riding her—— Oh, Father, Father!"

Betsy was picking her way like the fussy fine lady she was, down the miry slope. Father had slipped to his feet and was walking beside her, guided by her. In the dim light Mercy could not see his face. But she stumbled up the shelving bank to him. Father still held to Betsy's bridle. His free arm shot out and caught Mercy tight.

"Oh, Father, I knew you'd come!"

Father chuckled, his own old soothing reassuring chuckle.

"Don't you think it was about time?"

Something leaped and soared in Mercy's breast. The

dying moon lifted a torch of flame. The black miry road turned to a highway of silver.

"Now, dear, we've got to find that ford. Betsy will pick her way to it. We don't need to worry."

They did not need to worry. Betsy, shrewd creature, tiptoed down the creek bank for nearly half a mile. Finally she halted, for a minute or so. She sniffed and tossed her head, protesting. Then, with the drollest hesitation, exactly as if she were picking up intangible petticoats, she tiptoed into that black water.

Mercy crouched high on the pommel, but the racing current washed over her and all but tore her from her seat. Father swam beside Betsy. His low voice never ceased coaxing her, encouraging her. Twice Betsy halted, shuddering. The icy rush of the water was almost beyond the might of her stout heart. But she struggled on.

The opposite bank loomed high. Suddenly Betsy caught a secure footing. Tilting, balancing like a ballet dancer, she thrust her way up the bank, stopped with a neigh of triumph on solid ground.

Father shook himself like a big dog. Water dripped in steady streams from his big shoulders. Mud squelched in his shoes and plastered his face and hands.

"Who said we couldn't make it! Only three miles more to Springfield and Mr. Lincoln's house, Mercy. Only three miles more!"

A pale and watery dawn was painting the sky with a raw gray light as they reached Mr. Lincoln's house and looped Betsy's bridle over the hitching post.

It took a good while to waken the house. Father rang and rang the clanging old bell. Mercy pounded on the door.

Finally an upper window opened. Out thrust a tousled head.

"What in the name of judgment——"

"Come downstairs a minute, Mr. Lincoln. It's just us."

"Mercy Rose! And Mr. Stafford! What in the nation——"

The head disappeared. Soon the front door swung open. Mr. Lincoln, wrapped in vast yellow-flannel toga, stood, candle in hand.

"Where did you two come from? What has happened? You look as if you'd been dipped in the creek!"

Mercy looked up at him. In the gray light, her little ghostly face was pure joy.

"It's about Richard. But now I've found you, everything will be all right. You'll take care of Richard. You'll save him. For me."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“LISTEN to me, son. Let me get this straight.” For the twentieth time, Mr. Lincoln took a fresh grip on his waning patience. He leaned forward and bent steady keen eyes on Richard’s steady keen face. “You want to remember I’m your attorney. I’m doing my best for you. But I’ve got to have the whole story. You must give a man something definite to work on. Out with the rest of it.”

“I’ve told you all you need to know. I’ve told you that I thrashed Frederick Owen. Thrashed him hard. But I didn’t kill him. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

“You say that after you’d thrashed him you tied up his broken jaw and helped him on his horse and saw him ride off. Where did you go after that?”

“Where I went then is my own affair. I take my oath that, the last time I laid eyes on Owen, he was riding away in the direction of his farm. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

“But man alive, you must prove your whereabouts during the time intervening. You say it was around four o’clock when you and Owen fought. Where were you for the next twenty-four hours? What were you doing? Can’t you see that your life hinges on that measure of time?”

“That happens to be nobody’s business. Not even yours, Mr. Lincoln.”

Mr. Lincoln got up, strode across the room, and then slumped down into his chair again.

“The minute Mercy and her father had given me a clear road, this fool had to block it,” he thought wrathfully.

What was a man to do with such a chivalrous young idiot? Especially when he knew very well that if he stood in the young idiot's shoes, he himself would hold this identical stubborn silence.

"Look here, Richard. You want to shield little Mercy. But she does not need your protection now, not as she will need it in years to come. If you really want to take care of her, you'll save your life for her. You'll not risk it like this."

Not a flicker came on that young hard face.

"I'm willing to take my chances on it."

Mr. Lincoln got up again and paced the jail floor, speaking eloquently under his breath. Finally he took another tack.

"If I promise not to repeat one word you say, if I give you my oath on that, will you tell me? Tell me, not for your own sake, but for Mercy's?"

Richard was not so adamantine as he appeared.

"If you put it that way. . . . Well. I'd like to tell you what happened, and maybe you can find a way out for me. But you're not to bring in Mercy's name. Mind that. If you do, I'll stand right up in court and tell the jury that you're lying to save me. The whole town, the jury itself, is dead against me as it is, because of my Underground work. You know that. You'd have the easiest time in the world convincing them that I ought to be hung. So don't slip up. Don't speak her name. For if you do you'll hang me."

"Hold your horses, son. I promise, right now, never to speak her name. But go on. Maybe I can find us a crack to crawl through. No telling."

"All right. Here goes. Mercy and I went out riding. Owen accosted her, attacked her at that. I gave him what he needed, and gave it good and plenty. Then I took Mercy

home. Her folks had all gone to Springfield and I stayed there that night. All night. Don't you see that I can't mention her name?"

He stopped. All that insolent calm of his was shaken. Slow crimson poured into his face.

"Oh. Of course I see." Over Mr. Lincoln's own face came measureless pity. Of course he understood, he said to himself. The two adoring young creatures, alone in that empty house. Blame them? As well blame the wind of destiny that had swept them together.

"Yes. I see. No, I'll not mention that child's name in the court room, Harrison. Nor will I mention it anywhere else. You can depend on me."

Mercy sat in the window, trying to mend the tattered object that was Seth's last surviving roundabout. She had sat there and fumbled with it for an hour. Probably she would fumble another hour before Aunty would come in and take it from her hands and say, so gently, "Never mind, my lamb. I've got a plenty of time for the mending. Go lie down, now. Try to sleep.

Try to sleep. That was what they always said to her. Try to sleep. If they would only help her to wake up instead! If they could only help her to break down the wall of mist that was rising around her hour by hour! That wall of mist that had changed too swiftly, so incredibly, into a wall of glass that cut her off from breathing, even!

She looked back curiously at the faraway night when she had fought her way to Mr. Lincoln, when she had thrown her whole burden of fear on his great shoulders. Mr. Lincoln was her strong hope. Surely, surely he could not be failing her!

That was two weeks ago, and Richard still sat alone

and waited. And she too must sit waiting, waiting with a face of ashes, the pulse in her blood a waning thread. And now Mr. Lincoln was yet holding his silence. Oh, could Mr. Lincoln be defeated, too?

She had made Father take her to see Richard, just once. She stared back at that glimpse of him with a dull wonder. At sight of him, it seemed to her as if her heart had broken, very quietly. Everybody stood so far beyond that mighty wall of glass. But Richard was farther away than anybody. Miles away. Never again could she reach him. Never could she break her way through that crystal wall.

Richard looked just as usual. He didn't look like a prisoner on trial for murder. He had on his best suit, and his hair was brushed like satin, and he glanced at her as if he hardly knew her, and said, "Hello, Mrs. Lot," and that was all. When he spoke, though, his mouth had given a little twitch. She had seen that twitch around Donny's mouth when he was trying to keep a stiff upper lip and not give way to a lonesome streak. You could usually comfort Donny by giving him something interesting to do. But you couldn't give Rich anything so very interesting. Not when he was fighting for his life.

Though he would not talk to her, he did say something to Father. Poor Father, so gray and shaky, with his gray shaky whisper—— "Richard, tell me what to do. God knows I'd do anything. Anything!"

Richard had stared at him. Then he had pulled Father aside. But Mercy caught his fierce undertone: "Keep Mercy's name out of this. Don't bring her here again. Don't let them drag her in. Not even if—— Never, I tell you!"

Perhaps it was quite as well that she had not asked Father why Rich was so stern about it. Didn't he know well enough that she was keeping still, just as he had bade

her? But even if Father had tried to explain, the chances are that she would never have understood him. For her anguish had dulled her past all understanding. She had gone home and ironed the tablecloths and Father's shirts. Twonnet couldn't iron a shirt decently, and Aunty got too tired. She had done a great baking and made wild-strawberry preserves and sent Jo Vanny to dig a huge mess of dandelion greens. "Get enough for the monkeys and us, too." And Father had come home, and called her into his little study, and brought a basin of water and the liniment, and he had bathed her throat and bandaged it, with hands that shook for tenderness and eyes that could hardly see. It made her throat feel better, but it was dreadful to worry Father so. And she had moved about like a little chalk image, driven by rusty jerky wires. And all the time she was counting. Seven days till Richard's trial. Six days. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

She awoke long before daybreak that last morning. She crept down from her loft and went out into the dark rain-wet garden. In the soft night, she groped to the little peach-pie trees, and stood holding fast to a slim branch. There was something she must think out. There was something she could do for Rich.

If she could only remember. If she could only plan. But now she could not think. She could not even feel. She could not see. She put the ruby ring to her lips, she peered through the dark, but she could not see Rich's face. The wall of glass was too tremendous. Rich was too far away.

It was barely daylight when Mr. Lincoln plodded up the lane and tied old Tom to the rack. Even the little boys were not yet awake. Mr. Lincoln bent over Mercy as she sat crouched on the doorstep.

"Beat me up this morning, didn't you? Want to fetch me a bite of breakfast, my dear?"

Mercy stumbled obediently into the kitchen. She brought him some porridge and milk and set a slopped cup of coffee before him. Not even Twonnet could have been more clumsy. She had put on a fresh blue muslin dress and a crisp pink apron. Above that smart starched rose and blue her face was lusterless, her mouth was sagged and dull.

"Mercy, to-day is Richard's trial."

(How funny of him to tell her that!)

"And you had better come to the court house. Be there by ten. I shall call you to the stand. I want you to tell the Judge that Richard came home with you after his fight with Owen. And that he never left you. And that he was never out of your sight till the sheriff arrested him the next afternoon."

Mercy stared at him listlessly. He was darkly flushed. He was trying to drink his coffee but his hand shook so that he splashed it all over the clean tablecloth.

"Why, of course he never left me. Not for one minute. The judge must know that."

"The judge does not know that."

"Didn't Rich explain why he stayed all night with us?"

Mr. Lincoln stared down into her puzzled eyes. He felt as if he were striking a child.

"Listen, Mercy. As the case stands, the court believes that, after giving Owen that beating, Richard took you home and then went back alone, killed Owen, and threw him into Coles Creek. If you can make the court understand that Richard did not leave you . . . don't you see that that gives him a chance at acquittal?"

Mercy tried hard to understand.

"You mean that Rich has never explained all that. That he—— Oh, I see now."

Mercy's small chin set hard. Slow painful scarlet burned to her eyelids.

"Yes. I understand, now. Don't you worry about me, Mr. Lincoln. I'll come."

Mr. Lincoln rode away. On his gaunt face there was an expression at once heartsick and grimly satisfied.

"All all events I have kept my word to young Harrison. By a shyster's trick, though. I swore I'd never bring Mercy's name into court. I did not swear that I would not bring Mercy herself."

It was a long way up the courthouse steps. Mercy had to take those steps one at a time, she was so dizzy. She had slipped out of the house cautiously, for fear they might see her and make her stop. But only Thomas had seen. Promptly he had tagged after her.

"Where you going, sister? I want to go, too."

"Come on, then." She took his warm little hand. His chubby grasp was vaguely pleasant. She hadn't thought of taking anybody. But, far behind that huge impassable wall, she was rather glad to have him beside her.

She crept down the dingy halls. It was a hot day. The courtroom door stood open. Through it came a high snap-pish voice, asking questions. Then Richard's voice, cool and insolent and serene.

"That is all you have to say in your own defense?"

"That is all I have to say."

Richard was just leaving the stand. In the hour he had stood there under fire, he had managed to antagonize the entire audience. He had made an abominable witness for himself, Mr. Lincoln thought angrily. Had he played forlorn and persecuted youth, unjustly accused, he might have

won for himself some sympathy. Instead, he strode into the courtroom, his head up, his trim garments as brushed and ordered and fresh as a bridegroom's, so unabashed, so jaunty, and he had looked down on the stubby little prosecutor almost with amusement. As he stepped down an ugly mutter drifted through the room.

Mercy pushed forward, holding Thomas's hand. No one had noticed them. They might have been two children who had wandered curiously in.

She drew close to Mr. Lincoln. She reached over and touched his arm.

Mr. Lincoln looked up. With a great start he sprang to his feet. Away from the other side of that wall of glass, she heard his stammering words, "New witness—unexpected—if your honor will permit——"

She stood before Judge Parsons now. Was that her own voice? What a funny crackly little squeak! She must do better than that. But it was sort of bewildering, for now they were all craning and staring at her. Staring as if she was some ridiculous little animal that had crept into this solemn place. Well, what of it? They looked rather ridiculous themselves. The stout old judge, huddled behind his desk, looked like a surprised old rabbit. His shoulders were hunched, his large lumpy nose was quivering. His white blobs of whisker twitched, his dewlaps swung as if they meditated flight on their own account. The jurymen reached forward from their tight pew. They were all Bakerstown folks, they all knew her, but they gaped and goggled as if they'd never laid eyes on her before. But she could not see them so very clearly. For the glass wall was shimmering now like a great glass bubble, and its curving transparency sucked in and out, so that all the faces flickered and glimmered like faces seen in a blazing fireplace. Still, she knew everyone. And there was Father, in his

black Sunday clothes, with his mouth set white and his dear hands clenched on the back of the chair in front of him. Father wouldn't look at her, for he was afraid that one glance might shake her courage. Likely! Mr. Lincoln was standing up, holding her with his eyes, tall and yellow and slouching, with his coarse black Injun hair, as Aunty called it, all scabbled back from his cadaverous face and the sweat of misery running in rivulets down his furrowed cheeks. But even his face blurred and grew dim. All the faces were dim. All but one. Richard's. Richard's face stood out sharp and clear, graven like marble against the stained buff wall. Richard——

No. She must not look at him. She dared not. For if she once met Richard's eyes, those curving walls of glass would shiver around her. And all her strength would fall in splinters, too, and there wouldn't be one thing left of her. Nothing but the handful of glass right under folks' feet.

“Mercy Rose Stafford——” It was Mr. Lincoln speaking, a hum of meaningless words like swarming bees.

“If you please, Mr. Lincoln, may I tell Judge Parsons just what happened?”

Again that blur of words.

“Judge Parsons, I don't believe anybody really knows what a plague Frederick Owen was to me. He was ugly to me from the start. It all began in Father's printing office. I was working at the press, and he came in and started to make fun of me and of the press because it wasn't doing very good work. He tried to make sport of Father, too. When he found we didn't pay attention to him he got awfully silly. He tagged me everywhere, and asked me to go riding, he brought me boxes of store candy, he even brought Thomas a peppermint cane and Adoniram a

toy rifle. But I made Donny give the rifle back. Finally he came to the office again and started to cut our initials on the wall, his and mine. And I made him stop. That vexed him. I guess he made up his mind that he wanted to hurt me. Worse than hurt me. Shame me so dreadfully that it would shame Father and all of us——”

Richard shot to his feet, but the sheriff's heavy hand fell on his arm. Father leaped forward. Mr. Lincoln's instant warning gesture thrust him back.

“Well, he got his chance to hurt me. And he took it.”

The people in the courtroom weren't people any more. They were just eyes. Ring on ring of staring eyes.

She halted again. The room had begun to rock and swing. Mr. Lincoln lunged over to the water-bucket and filled a tin cup. She drank obediently. Then he drank, gulping, the way he did the day of their prairie fire. His big hands shook as he set down the cup.

The water tasted good. It washed the queer husk out of Mercy's throat. She spoke on.

“You remember telling us about the *Creole Belle* mirror, Mr. Lincoln? Rich and I went driving over that way. He was taking those papers to Colonel Andrews for you. Coles Creek was so high that he left me and the chaise on this side and swam one of the horses across. He wasn't gone half an hour, but it began to rain, so I went into the haunted cabin.

“Frederick Owen was there. I didn't know it till he spoke to me. Then I saw that he was very drunk. Surly, too. I started to run, but he caught me and threw me against the wall and struck me over and over. Then he jerked out that little dirk of his and cut my dress off my shoulders and began to cut his initials on my throat. Look.”

She pulled back the blue gingham ruffles. On her soft throat, the jagged unhealed scar stood out, a swollen crimson ridge.

"He'd made only that one cut, though, when Rich came tearing in. Rich was furious. He grabbed Frederick and gave him a terrible thrashing. Then I helped him tie up Frederick's jaw. And he put him on his horse and he rode away towards his farm. He was so drunk, though, and so shaken up from his beating that I suppose he must have turned his horse and tried to cross the creek. That was why they found him in the creek, drowned."

The room was deadly still. So still, you could hear a blue fly buzzing against the pane.

Then Mr. Lincoln spoke.

"You are telling us all this in order to prove that Richard Harrison had sufficient provocation——"

"No, Mr. Lincoln. I want to prove that Richard could never have killed Frederick Owen. He *couldn't*. For after Frederick had galloped off, Richard took me home. He meant to start west that night, but I wouldn't let him go. I made him stay. All the folks were in Springfield, and I was afraid to stay alone with Thomas, for poor Thomas had the worst attack of croup I ever laid eyes on. If your own little boys ever had croup, Judge Parsons, you know all about it. You know how terrible it is when they choke and choke and you can't help them. Richard and I worked all night and twice I thought Thomas would strangle. But he pulled through, though he's croaky even yet. It was almost five that morning, though, before he could breathe. So you see Rich was never out of my sight. He had no chance to go back and kill Frederick, even if he had wanted to."

She halted. The room was growing very dark. Probably

a thunderstorm was coming up. The watching eyes stared at her through a thickening blur.

—"Judge Parsons, I should have told you all this long ago. But I never dreamed how foolishly my menfolks were behaving. I didn't know that they were keeping all this back. And all on my account. You know how ridiculous your own men can be. Always trying to take care of you, to keep people from talking about you, from telling cruel lies—as if lies could ever make any real difference! Always so set on shielding you, even if they risk their own lives to do it. They never do understand. Not for one minute. They never can realize that you've got the right to shield them, to take care of them—that they belong to you, just exactly as much as you belong to them——"

The curved glass walls were sliding, swerving: they grew thinner, every instant. But the room was so dark. She could not see Mr. Lincoln any more. She could not see Rich. She must hurry and finish, and finish, and go to Father. Father's face she could see, and clearly. Under his silver crest, his face was like death. If she could just reach him, comfort him——

But there was a splintering crash. And the darkness closed down.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

AT eight o'clock that night, Old Tom's hoofs clattered up the lane. Mercy, lying in Father's big chair, lifted her drowsy head. This was an unheard-of hour for Mr. Lincoln to arrive. It was part and parcel of this unheard-of day. What could bring him so late?

She looked down on her small elegant self with vague complacence. She had lain asleep all afternoon, a limp exhausted sleep. But to-night, Aunty and Miss Evelina had helped her to get up and dress. Each glimpse at the eagle mirror gave an added satisfaction. Over her delightful lilac poplin lay her mother's shawl of amber crêpe, with fading wistaria wreaths of lilac-blue. On her feet were her Sunday slippers; on her little hand glittered the great ruby, shining with deep promise. Through the kitchen door she could see Rich, attended by the admiring little boys. In the presence of this, their hero, even little Thomas had long since ceased to stick out a jealous tongue.

However, Rich had failed to live up to his glories. Even as they hurried him home from the courthouse, he had put that black fortnight behind him as if it had never been and had inquired anxiously whether they had plenty of Mercy's bread and cookies at hand. It appeared that jail fare consisted largely of greenish saleratus biscuits and sodden doughnuts. Once arrived, he had been fed by a dozen eager hands at once. His capacity, however, appeared unlimited. He had eaten, then slept for hours, then arrayed himself with splendor and wandered to the kitchen again, where he and the little boys were now sociably pick-

ing the bones of the roast wild turkey that Mrs. Brooker had sent over. Father was out there too.

"Poor Father, he's always been so cruelly jealous of Rich," thought Mercy. "But he knows now that he can't hate Rich without hating me. For I'm just a piece of Rich, now. And he's doing his very best to take him as his own. But it's what Mr. Lincoln would call a land-office job. Goodness, what can have made Mr. Lincoln come away out here? At such a time of night?"

Mr. Lincoln had stopped at the kitchen door. There was a clamor of welcoming voices. He came in, the whole family trailing at his muddy heels. He looked at once embarrassed and smug, as well he might. For he carried two parcels. One was a jeweler's box, small dainty, tied with betraying white ribbon. The other was a bandbox, a gigantic flowered bandbox, covered with Chinese paper, all green and gilt chrysanthemums, and sky-blue pagodas, and plum-colored dancing girls.

"W-why——"

With vast ceremony, Mr. Lincoln put the little parcel in her hand. She opened it. Before her delighted eyes shone twelve brand new silver spoons.

"Why, Mr. Lincoln——"

"Well. We've sort of decided, your Father and I, that this district isn't too healthy for Richard. Folks act some grouchy because he's been acquitted. So we two concluded we'd marry you off to-night. And ship you off to Springfield. Mrs. Lincoln and the boys are over to Vandalia on a visit. There isn't a soul in the house, and you'll take my front door key. Early to-morrow morning, you slip out and take the early morning stage to St. Louis. There you will meet a big Kansas-bound caravan that starts out west by Thursday. I'll give you a letter to the leader, Ainsley. He's an old friend of mine. He'll help you buy

your horses and outfit right in St. Louis, and he'll advise you where to buy your land when you get out to Kansas——”

The tumult that arose drowned his voice completely.

“Married to-night! Of all the outlandish——” “But, Mr. Lincoln, Richard is too tired to start off on the jump——” “But I want Mercy Rose to have a real wedding cake and a wedding-dress——” “Those things do not matter, Aunty. But to give Mercy up, and no warning——” “Sister, wait for me. I want to go, too!”

Father and Rich were gasping in unison. Mr. Lincoln went serenely on.

“Now this will be a hard drive, and I know your team isn't up to it to-night. So this is Jo Vanny's job. Here, Jo Vanny! Harness up your gilt wagon, and the ponies. Even if you drive straight into the mob, no danger. For they'll never look for our bride and groom in your circus wagon.”

Jo Vanny stood nailed in his tracks. His brown little face grew pale.

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you. Go tidy up your chariot!”

Jo Vanny fled in ecstasy.

“Now I realize that no wedding is legal without a present or so. I thought up the spoons myself.” Mr. Lincoln expanded slightly. “And when I was here this morning, I asked your Aunty what sort of a present you'd probably like best, and she said, a wedding bonnet. I couldn't get a regular bride's bonnet, there wasn't one in town. But I did bring this one. Seems kind of topheavy, but maybe it will do.”

He dived into the bandbox. There was made manifest a bonnet. It was an awful bonnet. It was an unspeakable bonnet.

“I showed it to Mary,” perhaps Mr. Lincoln had read

Mercy's stricken eyes. "She said, 'For Heaven's sake, Abraham Lincoln, who ever sold you that? I wouldn't be found dead in it.' I guess the milliner kind of outdid herself."

"There's a good deal of it, isn't there?" Thus Seth, the unterrified.

Then Mercy rose to starry heights.

"I think it's wonderful, Mr. Lincoln. I thank you with all my heart. There never was anybody like you."

Mr. Lincoln beamed. "Stick it on."

Mercy stuck it on.

There was a silence. Mrs. Lincoln was right. Nobody would have been found dead in it. It had started out in life to be a violet Tuscan coal-scuttle with long filmy beau-catchers of lilac. So far, so good. But when you added a large indigestible wreath of green grapes, and three shaded purple plumes; when a bunch of pink roses simpered over one ear and a stuffed Brazilian parrot leered above the other. . . . Oh, if it would please Mr. Lincoln she'd wear anything. Anything!

But Mr. Lincoln was viewing it with a dubious eye.

"Seth's right. Maybe if you'd skin off that embalmed bird—"

Then descended Aunty, another Atropos, scissors in hand. The parrot, the acrid green grapes, the funereal plumes, the roses, all fell as ripe grain before the sickle. There remained a small rapturous face, framed in violet, wreathed in a mist of lilac.

Mr. Lincoln looked on, amazed. Then he looked at Aunty. In his eyes lay awe.

"Keep those scissors handy, Aunty. For I've got a raft of speeches to make this summer. And I'll bet my last dime that I'll need those scissors. And you to work 'em."

He went leisurely to the door. Father and Rich went

leisurely with him. Father's voice was quick and quiet in his ear.

"You didn't ride all the way from Springfield, purposely to bring Mercy that bonnet!"

"The bonnet. And a few rounds of ammunition. I don't like the humor that this town is in, Stafford. Your recent articles in the *Clarion* have stirred folks up a good deal. And Richard's acquittal has made them boil over. Of course the decent folks are keeping their mouths shut, but a few hot-heads are trying to wake things up. Just as well I stay here to-night."

Richard turned away, towards Mercy. The two older men stood looking darkly into each other's faces. Father spoke out their thought.

"If I only shared Mercy's utter faith in Richard. . . . But no matter how generously I try to feel towards the boy, I can't feel certain that his innocence is proven. For Frederick Owen is dead. I don't believe he drowned by accident. Somebody killed him. And if not Richard—then who?"

"I know how you feel." Mr. Lincoln's gaunt face grew dull with tormenting thought. "I've told myself a dozen times over, that Rich is innocent. Yet if Owen died because of Rich's thrashing, it puts even a darker stain. Anyway, all my sympathy is with Rich. He'd be a poor sort, if he hadn't struck a blow for his betrothed. . . . Lord, but I wish I knew!"

He halted. Father, grim and haggard, had thrust in.

"We'll hurry Mercy and Rich away to-night, if you think it is necessary. But wherever can we find a minister?"

Then Mr. Lincoln unbent, with a long triumphant chuckle.

"Leave that to me. I picked up the young man who is to

preach for us at the Lord's Barn next Sunday. He's badly scared, for this will be his first wedding, but he has promised to do his very best, and I believe we can trust it to him. I found him as I came through Bakerstown. He says he's as orthodox as they come, though he hasn't yet made up his mind which denomination he belongs to. But that is no concern of ours. The main thing is that he's waiting down the lane, this minute."

To Mercy Rose the short hour that followed sped like a wheel of magic. Picture on picture graved itself upon her memory. Aunty, issuing stern hurrying commands to everybody, from Mr. Lincoln on down, yet her tense hands shaking, her poor face wet with unknowing tears; Miss Evelina, so swift to help, so loving and so sisterly, yet her soft eyes dark with strange envy; the little boys, who flocked around her, very quiet, very manly, but decidedly tremulous. Finally poor Thomas yielded to whole-hearted gulps, and that set off all three.

"Oh, boys, don't!" Mercy was on her knees on the floor, she was trying to get all three forlorn little figures into her arms at once. "Don't start on a lonesome spell yet, Donny. And, Seth, you mustn't roar so, I can't live and bear it. Listen, now! As far back as I can remember, I've wanted three things. I've wanted to ride away, forever, with a prince. A real prince. Ride away through moonlight. And in a gold coach. Now, I'm going to have my three wishes. Moonlight, gold coach, prince and all!"

"Huh." Seth made a plucky effort to swallow back his sobs. "If Mercy's got what she wants, us fellows may's well hush up. Listen, Mercy. Dast we be bridesmaids?"

Bridesmaids they were, much to the bewilderment of the serious, somewhat thick-headed young man whom Mr.

Lincoln had commandeered. It was a trying experience at best for that puzzled youth. From the first, he had agreed to perform this ceremony with much misgiving. Was it an orthodox act, indeed, to marry a man who had stood in court not twenty-four hours ago, accused of willful murder? And whoever laid eyes on such a light-minded bride, her bonnet tied on all very neatly,—this was Aunty's doing,—but a forgotten pink gingham apron still tied around her waist, and three excited little boys clinging to her, and pinching each other into decorous behavior? And who ever beheld such a distracted bridegroom, a groom as white as ashes, who gave his bride hardly a moment for her farewells, but hustled her into the preposterous gilded wagon and carried her away, in such mad haste that her little trunk must be hurled in half-packed, its rawhide straps still waving in the breeze! To be sure, he had gathered a vague idea that there was need for prompt departure. But what unseemly haste!

Mercy was not abashed by his cold young disapproval. Over and over she counted her dear new memories. Aunty's face, Miss Evelina's, Twonnet's, glowering on Rich in bitter dread: Father's look—— No, she need not try to remember Father's look. For Father's face would be with her always.

And Jo Vanny! Keenest of all her memories in days to come, would be the recollection of Jo Vanny's face, when Mr. Lincoln had commanded him to take Richard and herself on the first hours of their wedding trip. All humility fled Jo Vanny. He fairly reared and swaggered. With difficulty was he persuaded not to polish his wagon once more for this dripping prairie ride. This was his wedding, please understand, and lesser folk like Father and Mr. Lincoln had better keep away. Promptly the little boys lost

all interest in these trivial beings, the bride and groom. They tagged Jo Vanny from house to barn and back again, they clung to him with solemn admiring eyes.

"Only one thing kind of roils me," sighed Mr. Lincoln. "When I tell Mary Lincoln what she's missed——"

"Oh-h, if you think she wouldn't like it for us to stay overnight——"

"Go slow, Mercy. You're on the wrong track. Mary won't think of holding that against you. But I surely wish there had been time for me to fetch her in. She dotes on weddings and on funerals. Cries her eyes out at either one. Well, she'll feel I've been holding something from her. No doubt about that."

But now their golden chariot was at the door. A vast bland moon had lifted its lantern against the misty sky. Laughing, crying, awed, exultant, they rode away.

At daybreak, Father and Mr. Lincoln awoke. Both felt extremely sheepish. For the threat of a mob had vanished into thin air.

"We might as well have waited till morning, then sent them off with a flourish," grumbled Mr. Lincoln.

"We might as well have kept her with us, those few hours more," thought Father.

"Let's ride into Bakerstown, Stafford. You've got to set up the *Clarion* to-day. I'll give you a hand at it."

Father said nothing. They rode silently into the village, towards the little *Clarion* office.

Something queer about the building caught Mr. Lincoln's eye.

"What in the nation—why, yonder stands Jo Vanny's gold chariot, and his ponies! He must have taken Rich and Mercy into Springfield, just as I told him to, then he's

driven back this way. And stopped at the *Clarion*. Or else——”

He halted. Father did not say one word. For somehow Father knew.

Mr. Lincoln seized the latch. Then he dodged back. He dodged just in time.

The door had been lifted off its hinges, then poised so that at a touch it would fall outward and crash on whoever tried to enter.

The two men picked it up and shoved it aside. Still silent, they looked in.

The office was a wreck. Chairs, tables, stove, books, all were chopped and broken and torn, then piled in a heap in the middle of the hacked and splintered floor. The little press was damaged past repair. Axes and mauls had left it only a pile of ruin. The windows were broken, the very walls were slashed and torn. And on that heap of destruction, there lay another, smaller heap: a little crumpled bundle.

Even as he bent over that moveless little heap, Father knew.

“Jo Vanny! Speak to me! Tell me——”

Now you would have said that Jo Vanny would never speak again, he lay so lax and gray and lifeless. But at Father’s voice he roused himself with a cruel effort. He lifted his heavy eyes. Almost he tried to smile.

“I take them,” he whispered. “All safe. I drive back. Men here. I try hard to save——”

“Jo Vanny, what possessed you! You faced that mob, you gave up your life for my press——”

Jo Vanny smiled, a queer little gratified smile.

“Me, I push him. Make him go drown. Long time ago——”

“Push who? For God’s sake, Jo Vanny——”

"Freder-ique. He like very much hurt Mercy. I drive by river. He try swim out. I push him back——"

Poor little Jo Vanny! Lucky little Jo Vanny! He had prospered at his appointed task, he had paid his debts, he had paid his greatest debt of all, his debt of love. For he had lifted the heaviest of all burdens from Father's tired shoulders. Oh, lucky little Jo Vanny!

"Greater love hath no man——" said Father under his breath. Then he choked. Mr. Lincoln tried to say something. But he choked, too.

They laid Jo Vanny away with his broken violin beside him. All the music was smashed out of that violin. All the music and the courage and the maddening heedlessness and the white shining gratitude were smashed out of Jo Vanny, too. But he had lived to pay his debts, he had paid his greatest debt of all. Lucky little Jo Vanny!

"No use trying to patch up this press. No use whatever."

Father stood on the broken door-stone. He and Mr. Lincoln had finished listing the destruction. It had not taken long.

Mr. Lincoln straightened his bent shoulders and stared away at the rippling green of the prairie, the rippling blue of the sky.

"Reckon you're right. Well, let's see what we can do about another press, long as this one is done for."

"No use trying for a new one now, Mr. Lincoln. I'm owing everybody. No chance."

"I'm not so sure about that. But I do know that you're too tired to plan. Go home, Stafford, and get some sleep. I'll ride over late this afternoon and then we'll thresh this out."

Father went home obediently. He was too dead with

weariness to think, to plan. He slept for heavy hours. He ate, listlessly. He dragged around the farm doing odds and ends of chores, while the little boys, lonesome and fractious without their sister, trailed after him. For himself, he did not miss Mercy. Not yet. That loneliness was yet to come.

When he crept indoors again, Aunty was waiting. To her alone he told of the wreck of his office. She listened, without comment. When he had done, she spoke.

"John, I can't help much. But I can take one load off your mind." Her worn old face quivered. "And that's myself. I'm going to take Cyrus and go back east."

"Why, Aunty——"

"No, don't interrupt me. I came out with you feeling sure and certain that I would be a help. But all I can do is to lop around and be a pest and a hindrance."

Father tried to protest. Aunty shook her head. There were tears in her eyes now. The difficult tears of tired old age.

"Last week, my interest money came. There's enough to take me back to Green River. I'll take the little boys with me. I can keep 'em for a year, while you get a fresh start. You see——

"John, I guess I'll have to tell you the whole truth. I've been deceiving you, right along. For I have been an untruthful woman. For years and years. I've let you think I was seventy-four, going on seventy-five. But right now, I'm eighty. Going on eight-one. I—well. I've got so used to saying seventy-four, I've pretty nigh believed it myself. But there's a master difference when you get to eighty, John. You feel like you'd ought to settle down. You get kind of tired. So I want to go back home. Go back and stay."

After a few hours, Mr. Lincoln came. He was all agog with plans. But Father checked him.

"I'm going to sell my farm, and buy another press. With my own money, Mr. Lincoln. And keep right on."

"But your little boys?"

"They are going back east. With Aunt Celestia." For one moment the desolation of the coming days struck down upon him. "I'll rent a room in Bakerstown for myself and keep the *Clarion* going. I have accomplished nothing, so far, but maybe I will win over one man, make one convert, before they kick me out."

Mr. Lincoln stood on one foot, then on the other. He looked half-defiant, half-abashed.

"H'm. If you're so set on winning one convert to your standard, then listen. You've got one now. That's myself."

"You? You mean to tell me that? You're willing to agree with me?"

"I don't go so far as to say, willing." Mr. Lincoln shifted again to the other foot. He was embarrassed, he was trying to pass this off as a joke. But under the joke you could see that he was in deadly earnest. "You've got me licked, Stafford. I'm not wishful to come over to your side, but I've got to. You've never once let up on me. You've pushed and prodded and kicked and shoved. When I've tried to argue, you've cut the ground from under my feet. You've made me open my eyes and see. By George, sometimes I wish you had let me alone. It's a heap more comfortable to stay blind. Even the children have fought for you. Remember the night that Thomas gave me that clue—the house divided? Yes, I'm right with you, from now on. But don't pride yourself too much. As conquests go, I'm mighty small potatoes. A dumb old backwoods lawyer like me."

"It's good of you to tell me this." Father spoke me-

chanically. "It is an encouragement. The greatest encouragement you could give me."

"Well," Mr. Lincoln reached for his tall hat, crammed the roll of papers in securely. "I'm due at Carlinville to-night. Remember, whenever I can be of any use to you, you're to let me know."

He gave Father's hand a hard grip and was gone.

Father sat there a long time. The house was very quiet. Long gold shadows were deepening across the prairie when at last he roused himself.

"It was good of Mr. Lincoln to tell me that. And I'm thankful if I have helped him to see. Although I can't help wishing that my work had brought me a more efficient man. Mr. Lincoln is too old to accomplish much. Too old, and too disheartened. If only I had managed to convince a younger man, a man with spirit, energy, enthusiasm! Yet he may prove to be of some use. You never can tell."

Then Father forgot about Mr. Lincoln. He forgot his own long weary toil, his crushing anxieties, his bitter failures.

A long minute, he sat, eyes closed, his tired head bent. Presently he stretched out his hand and touched something, very gently. He need not look to see that which lay beneath his hand. A warm sleepy roll of yellow flannel. From one end of that roll depended a small red scalp-lock. From the other hung two bright-red flatiron feet.

THE
JOHN DAY



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